

The Crimson Garment

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The Crimson Garment

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Summary

(Reposted from Fanfiction.net under my old URL)

Humanity has given its autonomy to an alien race in exchange for ambition and progress, schools and universities have become armies and battlegrounds, and corporations are synonymous with the government. When a young girl embarks on a quest to seek answers and vengeance, she throws this new world into chaos. An alternate continuity of Kill la Kill set in a dystopian future.

Preface - Updates:

AN:

This story was originally written from 2015-2017 and was put on hold so I could focus on completing my master's degree. It has experienced retcons and changes since. The old version is still there in Fanfiction.net, but henceforth, any new chapters or content will be made in the version here on AO3.

1. The timeline has been completely overhauled to expand on world-building details and to account for current events.
2. Dialogues in various chapters were altered to be more realistic and/or less stock/clunky. Some minor plot points have also been changed to make more sense.
3. Due to the Timeline being completely changed, some paragraphs and dialogues for the purpose of exposition/world-building have also been altered.

Timeline

Timeline:

1900: Cloth-like material of unknown composition found in the soil of Cote d'Ivoire by French colonists. The sample is taken back to France for further testing. It was found to be sentient and would respond actively to contact with living organisms. They would also duplicate themselves by splitting in half. Fragments of the cloth-like material were then tested on rats. They began showing a remarkable increase in intelligence and strength, which increased over time, but their lifespan dramatically decreased.

1910: The cloth-like material, dubbed by the scientists as Bio-Fibre, begins being covertly woven into clothing designed for the upper stratas of society, including those with political influence, in order to observe its effects on humans. Bio-Fibre laced clothing is distributed all throughout Europe. It was found that humans showed an increase in grit, focus, intelligence and strength, but also radical changes in behaviour. These included an increased ability to charm and/or manipulate, mood swings, decreased empathy, polarised thinking, outbursts of anger, increased libido, and violent tendencies. Those in the age group 14-24 displayed highest Bio-Fibre tolerance but also the most severe personality changes.

1914-1919: Archduke Ferdinand is assassinated, starting World War 1. The Bio-Fibre project expands its ventures to Japan and the United States.

1939-1944: Adolf Hitler invades Poland, starting World War 2. The British Raj begins Bio-Fibre testing in India. At the same time, China begins testing.

1945-1949: All former Axis nations shut down Bio-Fibre testing initiatives, however former Allied nations continue their ventures. The Korean war occurs, splitting the Korean Peninsula in half. North Korea begins producing Bio-Fibre induced clothing exclusively for the Kim family. Cultural Revolution begins in China, it is found that the majority of revolutionary uniforms and equipment were Bio-Fibre laced. The tradition of producing Bio-Fibre clothing exclusively for CCP members and their families begins.

1950-1969: The Soviet Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom respectively become the largest producers and testers of Bio-Fibres. The United States moves all Bio-Fibre testing to Area 51 in 1966.

1972-1979: Singapore attempts Bio-Fibre testing in 1970 but the results are deemed substandard, the faulty product is sent to Kampuchea. The Khmer Rouge attains power in 1975. Bio-Fibre samples similar to those from Cote d'Ivoire found in Mecca, Saudi Arabia by Soviet archaeologists. Testing in Middle Eastern nations begins. South Korea shuts down all Bio-Fibre testing initiatives after the disbanding of the Third Republic of Korea. India declares national state of emergency and Bio-Fibre testing is shut down with its end in 1977. The Iranian revolution occurs in 1979.

1980-1989: Sri Lanka begins Bio-Fibre testing. The Sri Lankan civil war begins in 1983. South Africa and Belgium begin Bio-Fibre testing in 1984 and distribute Bio-Fibre laced

clothing to the political and social elite across African nations. The Berlin Wall is torn down in 1989, however, Bio-Fibre testing is still done in secret in former Soviet Russia.

1990-1999: Apartheid begins in South Africa and the Rwandan Genocide occurs in 1994. Iraq starts its own Bio-Fibre testing facilities. Shortly after, the first Iraq War begins. Chinese Bio-Fibre testing facilities are moved to the Kunming Laboratory of Diseases and Molecular Biology and tests if Bio-Fibre can be a protective measure against infectious diseases.

2000-2009: China and Iraq overtake the Western World in Bio-Fibre production and testing. The September 11 Attacks of 2001 occur, and shortly after the Second Iraq War begins. The SARS outbreak occurs in 2003, following which testing facilities are moved to the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Sri Lanka ceases Bio-Fibre testing after the end of its civil war in 2009.

2010-2019: A bacteria and virus killing fabric known as Silver TNCQ is discovered in Melbourne, Australia, in 2014. Silver TNCQ was tested along with Bio-Fibre and it was found that when woven with Bio-Fibre, it off-setted the decrease in lifespan normally caused by contact with the former. Another observed side-effect of Bio-Fibres was it increased the wearer's likelihood of contracting illnesses but combining them with Silver-TNCQ made the wearer immune to them after recovery. Bio-Fibre producing countries, with this newfound knowledge, start combining Silver-TNCQ, now with the common name of Greysilk, with Bio-Fibre clothing and increase the Bio-Fibre concentration from 1% to 5%.

2020-2032: COVID-19, after originating in Wuhan, spreads globally and the Coronavirus Pandemic occurs. A vaccine is produced and distributed in 2021. However, a second strain of the disease, immune to the vaccine, breaks out in 2025. Azure Shield, a CCP resistance faction, is formed in Taiwan and Hong Kong and is lead by Yuli Wong, a former Wuhan scientist. Azure Shield begins producing and distributing Bio-Fibre laced clothing to the common people in a last-ditch effort to save lives. Yuli is killed by the CCP in 2027 and they take credit for her discovery. The Tianmen Liberation occurs in 2030 and Azure Shield overthrows the CCP - making China a democratic country and all of its former sovereign territories independent nations.

2033-2040: The revolution in China inspires its neighbour, the DPRK, to overthrow the Kim Dynasty in 2033. Both Koreas are unified, but the South is unequipped to handle the sudden influx of people. Former South Korea decides to keep its borders closed and only allow former North Koreans to migrate to Southern territory if they pass a health screening, after which they are given Bio-Fibre clothing. The newly-formed democratic Chinese government incorporates a similar screening system for former North Korean migrants. Former North Korean territory becomes a ghetto for the impoverished and sick.

2040-2049: Bio-Fibre clothing is now manufactured as a low-cost medical necessity all around the world. Fashion and apparel brands start incorporating Bio-Fibre into Haute Couture, and soon Bio-Fibre is seamlessly incorporated into casual wear.

2050-2054: Fragments of the Chicxulub Crater asteroid were found after being buried within the earth for millions of years. Said asteroid was of multi-coloured cloth-like material later discovered to be Bio-Fibres and confirmed to be of extra-terrestrial origin. Other fragments of the same asteroid were found all over the world. It was not only found that Bio-Fibre fragment locations coincided with birthplaces of ancient civilizations but also the dawn of

humanity itself. It was also found that Bio-Fibre usage could be observed since ancient times and played a pivotal role in the progress of humanity - prompting them to be renamed as Life Fibres.

2055-2080: A series of experiments to test the effects of clothing made up of 10% or more Life Fibres begins in Honnouji, Japan. The experiment goes awry in 2055 and the lab in question is destroyed. All the scientists and test subjects die, save one survivor: Souma Kiryuin. Souma Kiryuin restarts his research on Life Fibres in secret and produces a new line of Life Fibre clothing exclusively for his family members. The newfound intelligence and strength of the family makes them rise to prominence, and the Kiryuins become one of the richest and most influential families in the world.

2080-2089: The Kiryuin Conglomerate begins manufacturing a new line of Life Fibre clothing with a "star system" indicating the percentage of Life Fibres contained within the garment. The higher the percentage of Life Fibres, the more expensive and thus prestigious the garment. Other countries follow suit. The Kiryuin Conglomerate becomes a monopoly and its influence begins exceeding that of the government.

2089-2099: Japan invents artificial wombs in order to solve its population crisis. Children born from artificial wombs are raised in boarding schools by childcare technicians until the age of 18 years. Soon bioengineering children to have desired traits becomes commonplace, and artificially designed children are seen as more desirable than naturally conceived ones. The practice soon spreads to other nations.

2100-2109: Due to the inability of the various regions to reconcile on the matter of Life Fibre integration, former Indian territory is split into four nations - Hindustan, Assam, Gujara, and Vindhya Nadu. Democratic China faces similar disputes and splits into six territories - Dongbei, Heibei, Shichuan, Yunnan, and Shanghai. The newly-formed Shanghai territory returns to a communist regime. Hindustan meanwhile installs a military dictatorship. Vindhya Nadu becomes the largest Life Fibre producer of the former Indian territories and exerts economic and social pressure on its neighbours in exchange for Life Fibre imports.

2110-2119: California and Texas secede from the United States. Shortly after, the Southern states secede and form the Confederate States of America, while the former 13 colonies comprise the new United States. Mass migration from what was once known as "flyover county" begins to the newly-formed American territories, who have implemented Life Fibre screening measures. The European Union dissolves in 2118. The Eastern half of the Russian Federation secedes and is now known as Siberia. The Russian Federation implements similar screening measures in order to allow Siberians to migrate to Russia.

2120-2129: The Gulabi Revolution occurs in Saudi Arabia and spreads to other Middle Eastern nations. Former theocratic governments are overthrown and previous restrictions on female labour participation and mobility are lifted. However, a Life Fibre-centric sociopolitical system takes its place.

2130-2141: Human beings who have been wearing Life Fibre induced clothing for more than twenty years start going on rampages all over the world. It was later found that prolonged exposure to clothing with 20% or more Life Fibres caused the wearer to be controlled by them until they would eventually cease to exist. Possessed humans, now known as COVERS,

begin to call more to their aid by speeding up the consumption process of other human beings. The process is exacerbated by Life-Fibre producing corporations, whose leaders have fallen prey to the consumption process as well. The Kiryuin Conglomerate's Life Fibre producing company - Kiryuin Threads, changes its name to REVOCS to reflect this.

2142-2155: The First Life Fibre Invasion, a war between COVERS and their sympathizers and the resistance, begins and lasts for seven years. The resistance is crushed. Over one half of the world's population is consumed or dead. The COVERS, aided by Life Fibre sympathizers, are now a mainstay and free humans have turned to hiding. All over the world, Life Fibre reliant corporations have replaced governing bodies and nations have been split into socio-economic zones according to the Star System. In 2155 the Spectrum Alliance, a global governing body designed to replace the U.N, is formed.

2160-2190: Humans begin fusing themselves with Life Fibres to make the benefits of Life Fibre clothing permanent, thus creating Hybrids. They resemble normal humans save for having coloured streaks of hair and abnormal eyes. By 2190, over ten percent of the remaining global population consists of Hybrids.

2190-2240: The Second Life Fibre Invasion begins and lasts for ten years, the resistance manages to defeat the COVERS, but Life-Fibre centric sociopolitical systems remain in place. Various corporations begin to push the narrative that COVERS are a result of unsafe practices that have henceforth been scrapped.

2240: The Kiryuin Conglomerate's eldest daughter, Ragyo Kiryuin, becomes a Hybrid.

2255: Ragyo and her husband, Soichirou begin experimentation on their twin daughters. Attempts to turn the elder one into a Hybrid failed, and the younger one died. Soichirou defects from REVOCS and goes into hiding.

2258: The Spectrum Alliance, which Ragyo is a part of, begins its plans to revive the COVERS.

Prologue

I came from the richest family in the country.

My mother was a CEO, my father was a scientist.

I always wore designer clothes; I had impeccable manners and etiquette. I was elegant, graceful, and poised. I was always clean and well groomed; there would never be a hair out of place.

I attended a private school for affluent children, and was valedictorian since I was five. In fact, I was so clever that I was able to skip a grade.

I was in the music club, and won first prize every year for piano, violin, and singing.

I was on the volleyball team, and I always made the winning serve. I was on the track team, and always came first.

I was the student council president, I always got elected, and I conducted every event to the best of my ability.

I was a model student, a model daughter, and a model successor. I knew I could be no less. I had to strive for perfection; perfection was in my blood, there was no room for error, no room for fallibility, no room for humanity...

And to all outward appearance, perfect was what I was.

But every day when I came home, when I was bombarded with the chatter of Mother's colleagues, when I forced myself to attend lessons, when I felt crippling loneliness in spite of all those around me, I remembered. I remembered her innocent blue eyes and wide smile, I remembered longing for her day in and day out, I remembered the story of how she died.

And every night, when I was reminded of just how weak I was. When I allowed myself to be manipulated into submission, when I was reminded of all my defects, of just how small I was, I would remember...

I was nothing more than a pawn in the hands of others.

I was far from perfect.

Wilted Flowers

The date was May 1st, 2255.

It was a day of endings, but also a day of beginnings. It was a day of death, but also a day of birth.

Or to be more precise, the day when two children who shared a womb opened their eyes to this hellish world.

There was a time when giving birth was a painful process, when anaesthetics had to be given to the mother to prevent her from screaming in agony as her child was pushed out into the world. Now it is incredibly easy, at least, for the mother.

All the woman and her husband had to do was wait patiently and see to it that their plans were going in motion, they were cool and composed, eerily so as they turned a deaf ear to the screams of the woman in the other room.

And then, it finally happened. A maid appeared before them, carrying two pink bundles in her arms. The woman looked on, unmoving as her husband carried both the children in his hands and admired them as a proud father would. Those children were not conceived out of love, but in a glass tube, monitored and manipulated so that they would inherit the strengths of both parents, and then implanted in a poor young lady desperate to make ends meet. Yet that did not matter to the man, not in the least bit.

"They look just like you..."

The woman frowned as she looked at them; they were so undeniably human in appearance, as she once was. They had the same jet black hair and icy blue eyes that she did before she corrected her human deficiencies. However, this would not be the case for long...

"We should get a move on, all preparations have been finished."

The man stared in shock; he knew of late that his wife was acting strangely. They loved each other deeply once upon a time, and she was once a compassionate, caring, albeit eccentric person. And then her quirks started to become more pronounced. She started becoming more cold, cruel, calculating, apathetic, violent... inhuman.

But he chose to ignore it and gave her the benefit of doubt; they had no choice but to do this if they wanted perfect successors who would carry the family name. They had to have perfect children, wasn't that what every parent wanted?

And so he accompanied his wife to the lab, and placed one of the babies on the operating table, he held a scalpel in his trembling hands. There was a good chance that the child would die if the experiment failed. However, if the child lived, she would be perfect, but unhappy. She would live her life as a fish in a glass bowl, constantly watched over and having every little aspect of her life controlled, and if she lived to adulthood, she would slowly succumb to

them for the sake of maintaining her perfect status, and then she would eventually cease to exist. Or perhaps not, maybe she would be strong enough to hold on to whatever little humanity she had, after all, her mother was the same, was she not?

"Soichirou, get on with it."

He nodded, and injected the baby with a needle. The sedatives would knock her out long enough so that she wouldn't notice what was being done to her. Centuries ago, he muses, sedating a newborn would have been impossible without killing it. Medicine has come a long way since then. Then he shaved her head with a razor, and then used the scalpel to cut a line across her head, dividing it into two equal parts, and then her skull was exposed. Then with a pair of tongs, he held them gingerly, the glowing spools of blue thread that would change everything...

They began to thrash about and then latched themselves on to the child's brain, and then they began to move downward, presumably to her spinal cord, before eventually spreading to the other parts of her body. Then, once she was stitched back, she was placed in the machine, with sensors and wires on her head. His wife pulled the switch, and the lights began to flash, a current began to pass through. The child's eyes flung open, and she began to wail for the pain to stop.

Soichirou couldn't bear to watch.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he looked up, expecting one of two outcomes: death, or a ring of blue appearing on the top of her bald head.

Nothing.

There was nothing, the child was just the same as she was before.

"I don't understand..."

The woman scoffed, burying her face in her hands.

"Indeed, I don't understand either. They were supposed to fully integrate with the nervous system. The body rejected them, but still lives on... this is puzzling."

Soichirou's eyes grew wide. She was lapsing again. She was doing that often these days, but he knew how to make her come out of it. However, now wasn't the time to do so.

"No matter, there is always the other one..."

Soichirou then repeated the same process on the other baby, only this time with red threads, and when she too began wailing in the machine, he averted his eyes, praying that at least this one would be a success...

The child was as pale as a ghost, and lay there, limp and lifeless.

Instinctively he opened the door, took the child in his arms, and began to weep. Then he looked at his wife, searching her eyes for some form of the sadness and pain he was feeling...

There was nothing but cool indifference and icy disdain. She sighed contemptuously and began to mumble to herself about what could have gone wrong, wondering if they should try engineering another child, mulling over the possibility that they could try again with their surviving child...

"It is no use, Soichirou. There is no point in crying over it. This one was too human. We can always make another."

She had done that often when she lapsed, he remembered. Even before they were born, she would swing from planning family outings and trips with her daughters, to coldly instructing the servants to raise them separately to mitigate the speech delays usually suffered by twins. She would alternate between calling them 'she' and 'it', often in the same conversation...

He had to snap her out of it now. He had done it many times before, in circumstances much like this one. He could do it again. And once he did, she would weep with him. He wiped his teary eyes with the back of his sleeve and stared at her with focused determination.

"Ragyo... remember what I told you."

"I'm aware of the fatality rate of the hybridisation process, and getting another surrogate will be a logistics issue but one that can easily be solved. As for Kinagase, she'll be paid handsomely, even though she gave us a failed product."

She usually remembered that cue, but today, it failed to jog her memory. He kept probing further, hoping the woman he loved was still somewhere in there.

"Failed product?! Haruka is dead! And Satsuki-"

"Is defective. Don't try to mince words with me. Well, all is not lost. A defective product can still prove a useful spare if something happens to our successor."

"Ragyo... you're doing it again. You've lost your way. Please, try to remember who you are. Don't. Lose. Your. Way."

It was an exercise they often practised. He emphasized each word in that phrase, knowing he had trained her mind to see it as a trigger, to flip a switch as soon as it was uttered-

"I know what my ambitions, OUR ambitions are, Soichirou. I have no intention of losing sight of them, but it seems that you do-"

She tottered a bit, and placed a hand on her head. Soichirou hoped for a miracle, he hoped Ragyo would come to her senses and fight, she did not.

"It's all right. Eventually, the headaches will stop. I can't have my humanity resurface, not when we're so close..."

That was all he needed to hear to know that it happened. The fate he was determined to avoid for over a decade had come to pass. His wife and the mother of his daughters was truly gone forever.

So while Ragyo paced the floor, wondering what to do from here, Soichirou solemnly walked out the door with the corpse of his dead child, leaving without a word.

And I was left behind.

A Blade and a Meeting

How many years has it been since I came here? Four? Five? At this point, I can't even be bothered to keep count anymore.

I walk towards the familiar door, I don't expect Dad to greet me with open arms and ask me how my year's been. He was never that type. He's always busy in the lab, looking for more ways to study those... things. I don't even know why he bothers. He hates them, well, he never told me, I guessed. That could be the only reason why he's here. Is he trying to fix me? Well, it's too late. I was doomed the moment I was dragged here, a hybrid living in a colony of wild humans? Said hybrid would just be asking for trouble.

When I enter, I notice something's wrong. It's dark, and it looks like someone trashed the place, pots, plants, furniture, what have you are strewn everywhere, there's cotton from destroyed cushions all over the floor, the works. I'm pretty sure something's up, so I leave my bags near the door and run to the basement, and that's when things really start to get weird...

I hear the sounds of swords clashing, a woman laughing, and Dad trying to fend off an unknown attacker, presumably the laughing woman. Stricken with terror and anger, I run downstairs, hoping to rush to Dad's aid.

Wait... why am I doing this? I know I'm not scared of the attacker; I can beat wild humans with no problem. That's not the reason why I'm so confused. To say Dad and I have a rocky relationship is an understatement. Why do I want to save the man who doesn't give a damn about me and cares more about his stupid experiments? I guess blood really is thicker than water then.

I shouldn't have thought of blood.

Dad's just... lying there, in a pool of red, with a part of a scissor shaped blade protruding from his chest. Instinctively, I run to him, tears rolling down my cheeks.

"Dad, who did this?! Let me get the bastard who-"

"Don't. She's like you. You wouldn't have stood a chance against..."

Dad coughs up blood, and my eyes grow wide when I realize what he's getting at.

"...Take this blade... the killer has the other half... and... take that chest over there... there's something in there I've been meaning to give you..."

"How the hell did another Hybrid find this place?!"

"Ryuko... go to Honnouji. There, you will find Mr. Mikisugi... my colleague... he has all the answers. And remember... remember what I told you..."

How could I forget?

"Don't lose your way."

"Exactly... right... Haruka-"

He starts coughing again, wheezing in pain as he flails about.

"Haruka..."

There's that name again. I don't know who this Haruka person is, but that's the last thing on my mind right now. Dad's eyes are getting darker, his pulse is getting weaker... he doesn't have much time left, and he knows it. He places a hand on my cheek, I can feel it shaking.

"I'm sorry... I shouldn't... have kept you in the dark. I should have... I should have told you the truth..."

"The truth? The truth about what?"

Before he can open his mouth again, he slumps forward. I shake him, but there is no response. His body is ice cold, his eyes are lifeless.

"Dad? Dad?! The truth about WHAT?! What's going on?!"

Secretive, cryptic... a man purely of action... until the very end. I strike him across his lifeless face, something I've wanted to do for as long as I could remember.

But what was the use in getting back at a man who was already dead?

"That's just like you... that's all you're good for, isn't it?! Leaving me alone... without telling me anything..."

Honnouji... In retrospect, coming here was an incredibly stupid idea.

Honnouji was life fibre central. You couldn't walk two steps without running into a one or two star clad human, sometimes you even saw a couple of hybrids. There were wild humans here too, of course, but they all lived in the slums, waiting to jump unsuspecting people for money or food, and when you were a hybrid, you were extremely likely to be jumped. But I had half of Dad's scissor blade, and I also was wearing the outfit Dad gave me, so I assumed I would be okay.

I said 'outfit' because I had no idea what this thing was, it was made of life fibres, that was for sure, but it didn't look like any uniform I had ever seen before. It was a red and black sailor outfit, but the shirt was short, so short that my midriff was exposed, but it didn't matter that much, but what was even stranger about it was the collar on the front, it looked like... a pair of eyes. It kind of scared me whenever I looked at it.

I did a bit of digging and found out that Mr. Mikisugi was a teacher at Honnouji Academy, one of the many schools across the country to make use of life fibres. I also managed to find out that his apartment was an hour from the school... in the slums.

I didn't understand why people were trying to migrate here from the Colony because life here wasn't that much different. Dilapidated wooden shacks instead of houses, drug dealers in dark alleys, brothels, thugs, scavengers, vendors that sold synthetic crap instead of genuine food... people, in general, have it rough. It was either give yourselves up to the life fibres or live a life of abject poverty.

"Get her!"

I turned around and saw a couple of street urchins running towards me, their ringleader, a boy of about eight years old with brown hair and black eyes looked kind of familiar to me... where did I see him before?

"Hey, Hybrid, cough up the cash and no one gets hurt!"

"Yeah, Hybrid! Give us all your money!"

'Hybrid...' I was used to being called that, usually by the goons back at school or the gangs that used to pick fights with me.

"You came to the wrong neighbourhood, bitch! Run back to your mansion and lick the Kiryuins' boots like you're supposed to!"

I had heard about the Kiryuins, they were the first family in Japan to make use of life fibres. They'd been slaves to the things for over a hundred years. They were owners of REVOCS, the sole producer of uniforms. They also had a huge interest in hybrids and were always searching for new ones to recruit. One of the few things Dad ever told me was to stay away from them, as once they knew about me; they would surely try to use me.

Perhaps then, the woman who killed him... it was highly possible that she was either a Kiryuin or in league with them. So that narrowed my search down a bit.

"Really, guys? You know, this street punk routine isn't working out for you..."

The brown-haired punk got out a knife and puffed out his chest, he had an evil grin on his face. He and his cronies began to surround me, but I wasn't intimidated in the slightest.

"You know who you're dissing? Lightning Speed Mataro, that's who! And we're gonna show you who's boss! We're gonna hurt you so bad that you'll be begging to leave us humans alone!"

"Yeah, Hybrid! Go back to your planet and leave us alone! You're only good for treating us low-lives like crap!"

The words I have heard so many times and almost believed made me snap.

"All right then, you wanna fight? Then come at me!"

They charged at me all at once, I swung out my scissor blade in a spinning motion, and that single move knocked all of them over. They were sprawled on the floor, slightly bruised but not seriously injured...

Then I saw the brown-haired punk being grabbed by the shirt by a girl about my age. She had the same hair and eyes as him, except she had a bob cut, and wore a blue and white sailor uniform. Immediately, a bell rang in my head.

It was no wonder that punk looked so familiar.

"Oh, come on, seriously?!"

"First of all, picking fights with hybrids is suicide. Second, the ones that are in cahoots with the Kiryuins are emotionless robots obsessed with order, and she doesn't fit that description in the slightest! And third, how many times have I told you to stop mugging people and get your sorry ass to school?"

She dropped him to the floor and he yelled in pain, then he got up and had a hand on his back.

"All right! All right! Just don't beat me up again..."

The brown-haired punk, who I then remembered was called Mataro, stomped off to his house, grumbling. Then his sister looked at me, and then I remembered a day that seemed like a lifetime ago.

"...Mankanshoku."

The girl looked at me, puzzled, did she not remember? Did she not recognize me?

"Yeah, Mako Mankanshoku... wait, you're... you look familiar... we've met, haven't we?"

I heard the sound of a tramway and a bell ringing, and then Mako grabbed me by the hand and started dragging me to it.

"Hey! Where are you taking me-"

"Hurry up!"

We began running as fast as we could to catch up with the tramway, with Mako screaming all the way.

"Ahh! I'm gonna be late! I don't wanna get expelled! Hey! Let us on! Let us on! Let us on!"

Eventually, we caught up and jumped onto the tramway, and we were on it. There were a bunch of kids wearing the same uniforms as Mako, and they were glaring at me as if I was some sort of criminal.

"Hey! Why'd you take me here? I'm supposed to meet my Dad's friend, Aikuro Mikisugi, and you just dragged me way off course-"

Mako froze, and then she gave me a knowing look. I could tell that I finally jogged her memory.

"Your dad... your dad's Ishin Matoi, correct? Shaggy grey hair, beard, kind of creepy..."

"Spot on."

"Then you're..."

We held eye contact for a few seconds. I nodded, silently confirming her thoughts.

"That day... he said your name was Ryuko, correct?"

"Yeah, it is."

"How is he, by the way?"

"He's... he's dead."

Mako looked sad for a minute, but then bounced back to normal.

"Oh... and, and he wanted you to meet Mr. Mikisugi before he died, right?"

"Yup."

"Well, don't worry! He's my homeroom teacher! You'll love Honnouji Academy, and I'm sure we're gonna be good friends-"

"Wait... you're taking me to... HONNOUJI ACADEMY?!"

I knew when we first met that Mako was a bit on the crazy side, but this? This was a new low. The worst part was how eager and cheery she sounded. It was as if she was going to take me to an ice cream shop.

"Don't worry, you'll fit right in! This won't be anything like the human colony, trust me!"

There was no formal admission process for school which made use of life fibres. They only wanted brains or brawn, and if you could prove your worth, they gave you a uniform. If you had no potential... then well, you got the slums, but you could always try again later... if you lived to survive No-Late day, which was code for "weed out the useless ones and keep the strong and smart."

"If the Kiryuins find out about me, they're going to take me away."

"Oh... Do you mean Lady Satsuki? We almost never see her in person, and she barely notices us no-star students. As long as you can lay low you're fine, but you may have to do something about your hair... ah, I know!"

She reached into her school bag and got out a hairclip. Then she lifted a part of my hair that wasn't red, pulled the highlight underneath it, and clipped it. I wondered how effective a disguise this would be. I briefly imagined the clip coming undone later, which was likely to happen, as I always kept my hair uneven. It was spiky, with different strands of different lengths and my fringe was long and unkempt to hide my huge eyebrows, another one of the

few things Dad told me to do. He always said that if I kept my hair straight, I'd look even more like a hybrid than I already am.

"There, now nobody will ever know!"

I gulped as I saw a giant pillar come into view, it looked even more intimidating than I had pictured. At the very top, I saw a person with long flowing hair standing with a sword in her hand.

That was probably this "Lady Satsuki" Mako had mentioned, and if she was a Kiryuin, I would have to avoid her like the plague.

"Is that her...? I asked, pointing to her."

"That's Lady Satsuki, the successor of the Kiryuin Conglomerate. Her mom appointed her as the essential ruler of our school. She might not be a hybrid like her mom, but she's super strong. Don't mess with her, or you'll enter a world of pain."

Yup. Avoid her like the plague.

"You don't have to tell me twice."

The tramway stopped, and the students began frantically running to the entrance, Mako grabbed me by the hand and safely manoeuvred me so that I wouldn't get trampled. I may have looked tough on the outside, but on the inside, I was shivering like a leaf.

I knew I'd have to find Mikisugi, get some answers soon, and get out. Otherwise it would be a matter of time before I was discovered, and I didn't want to be a mindless slave of an alien entity.

Gathering Intel

I had heard a lot about Life Fibre schools back in the colony, it was said they were an integral part of city life.

When you were a kid, you went to a normal school. But those schools sung praises of the Kiryuins and drilled into the students heads that Life Fibres were the best thing since sliced bread. Then, when you were about ten, they'd look at your marks, your skills, your physical fitness, and your code of conduct. If you made the cut, you'd go to a Life Fibre school for your secondary schooling. If you didn't, you ended up with about a fourth grade education and impoverished. I also heard rumours that if a new student came in, they'd have to take a super difficult exam on the first day with little to no warning, and then they'd be pitted against higher ranked students to determine where they belonged.

Mako told me that I wasn't too far from the truth. When I looked around the corridors I asked where the little kids were, and she said there were two campuses right next to each other, one for fifth to eighth graders and another for us, and that Satsuki's been ruling over both of them since she was old enough to attend.

"...and I'm sorry about Mataro. He really should shape up, I mean, he's going to be evaluated next year, and at the rate he's going, I doubt he'll get a place here."

"Hey, it's no big deal. Wait... where are you taking me?"

"To the staff room." She whispered in my ear, "If I take you to my classroom, they'll take you to the exam room and make you join the school. You said you didn't want Lady Satsuki to find you, right?"

I had to admit, she could be dumb, but she wasn't too dumb to live.

She stopped at the room in question. After a few minutes of waiting, a frail looking man with unkempt black hair and thick glasses came out of the room. His eyes seemed to be fixed on me.

"Mankanshoku, is this a new student? Why hasn't she been taken to the testing room yet?"

"Mr. Mikisugi, this is Ryuko Matoi, she says her dad was a friend of yours, and that she had some questions for you..."

He was silent for a few seconds.

"Come in, Matoi. Mankanshoku, go to class, tell everyone I'll be a little late."

"Okay, thank you."

He closed the door. The staff room looked just like the one in my old school, desks and papers were everywhere, but I didn't see any other teachers there. Mr. Mikisugi began to look

around cautiously, and then he closed the windows and drew the curtains, now the room was slightly dark.

"Why all the secrecy?"

He frowned and sighed.

"The walls have ears, Matoi, if I were you I'd be careful. One may never know..."

He walked closer to me and pulled out Mako's clip, and then smoothed my hair so that the highlight was visible.

"...when one will be open to attack."

I jumped back and held out my scissor blade at him, I didn't like this guy, he was hiding something.

"All right, what exactly were you to Dad? How'd you know that I was a hybrid?"

He didn't even flinch.

"Matoi, calm down. I'm not going to give you away to Lady Satsuki. In fact, I want you to leave here as soon as I'm done with you."

He began to pace the floor and started staring at me without wavering eye contact.

"Let's start at the beginning, what exactly brings you here? Did something happen to Ishin?"

"He's dead, some crazy lady broke Dad's scissor blade, stole the other half, and trashed his lab. He told me to come to you before he died, said you knew some answers. So let me ask you... why? Who wanted Dad dead, and why?"

He stopped pacing the floor for a minute, and then sighed.

"So they finally found him out, huh? I always knew the Kiryuins were on his tail, but I didn't think they'd actually come after him..."

I froze, I felt my blood boil as he mentioned that name. So I guessed my speculation was right on the money.

"You mean... you mean his murder was in cahoots... with THEM?! Why? Do they know about me? Did they want him to join them?"

"They wanted to take him out of the equation, for you see... this may be hard to believe but..."

"But what?"

"Ishin always had a bone to pick with that family, he never told me why, it was probably personal I guess. He hated them so much that he wanted to see to it that they were toppled

once and for all, that's why he was making those scissor blades of yours, they're specifically designed to cut through Life Fibres, and that outfit... well, you'll find out about it soon enough."

He moved towards me; we were now inches apart, now he was really starting to creep me out.

"Why keep quiet about this? Is it a uniform?"

"...something like that. Now where was I...? Ah yes, but your father wasn't alone. When you were very little, about two or three years old, your father hired me as his assistant. He had this big plan; he wanted to found an organization... rather, a resistance faction..."

Then he did something really weird. He took off his glasses to reveal greyish-blue eyes, flipped his hair back, and stood straight, as he was hunching before. Now he looked like some kind of male model, like the ones shown in the REVOCS commercials.

"...a resistance faction which is still very much active, thanks to me."

I blinked for a few seconds, trying to adjust to his new appearance. He was creepy without a doubt, but something about him was also alluring, I found myself staring a little too long, and turned to face the wall in a sharp movement.

"So... if you're the leader of this resistance faction... then why are you here, in a Life Fibre school?"

"Gathering intel. You know, the best way to defeat your enemy is to pretend you're in league with them, get to know their secrets, and when they are most vulnerable..."

I felt his hands on my shoulders; I jumped and ran away, my back against the wall.

"...you strike."

My heart was in my throat and I was shaking. So... the Kiryuins wanted Dad dead because of his little resistance faction, that made sense, and maybe... maybe that's why he didn't want me around. He wanted to keep me under their radar and away from all the crap he had to deal with so I wouldn't be killed, but that still didn't make him a better dad.

"All right. Thank you for your time, I guess I'll be on my way then-"

"No. I've got a better idea. I changed my mind about what I said earlier..."

I had a bad feeling about this...

"Don't you feel any anger over Ishin's death? I know he wasn't exactly a model parent, but blood is thicker than water, is it not? Don't you want to know more about what your father was after? Don't you want to see this killer get what she deserves? Don't you want... revenge?"

The logical half of me knew he was appealing to my grief to get me to finish what Dad started, but he was right. I secretly did want revenge, and now, thanks to Mikisugi, I was morbidly curious about what exactly it was Dad was planning...

His answers were not enough. I wanted to know more, especially about this truth that Dad wanted to tell me before he died.

"Forget it. She was a hybrid, a Kiryuin hybrid at that, I wouldn't stand a chance against someone like her."

Mikisugi chuckled and smirked at me.

"You're no fool, Matoi, you have a level head. That's good. But it's possible that you can get revenge... if you became stronger, if you did as I'm doing now. If you pretended to be an ordinary student, rose through the ranks, got chummy with the Kiryuins... and then once you found out who did it, stabbed them in the back."

My stomach began to churn, the idea of working for the Kiryuins, even if it was for an ulterior motive, made me feel sick with disgust.

"Oh hell no. You're not saying that I should actually study here, are you?"

"I'm saying just that."

"They're going to come after me if-"

"That's just it, IF. Don't let them find out, and you're safe..." he put the clip back in my hair, "But you won't remain past the radar for long, if you get that outfit of yours bloody, then well..."

"Then what?"

"Just try to avoid Lady Satsuki until you become at least a two star. Also, don't bring Mankanshoku into this, she's got a few screws loose, but she's really a nice girl. It would be a shame if she got in trouble because of you."

"I owe her a debt."

"Well, it would be best if you paid that debt soon. Now I have a job for you..."

He pulled his hair forward and put his glasses back on, and then he opened the door and whispered in my ear.

"You will go to the testing room, write the entrance exam, and go through the combat trials, just like everyone else. You're a hybrid so you'll at least pass in both, but of course, they don't have to know that. Once you do that, you'll lay low, and focus on becoming a one star. To do that, you'll have to have a 70 percent average and had to have joined a club, for you, I'd suggest the kendo club."

"Wait... I thought your rank got determined straight away."

"You thought wrong."

I was being offered a new life and a new motive; would it have been wise for me to take it? What did I have waiting for me? A life of being teased and mocked in a dingy colony, picking fights with random gangs and struggling to make ends meet. It was either go back to that, or grit my teeth and get through Mikisugi's ordeal to get answers.

I had made my decision.

"I'll do it."

"Excellent. Now go. The testing room is room 201. Good luck, and remember: Don't lose your way."

Those words, the ones that Dad would say to me the few times we talked, instinctively made me stop dead in my tracks.

"...How... how did you-"

"I guess some of Ishin's personality rubbed off on me."

He walked down the hall to Mako's classroom, and I walked up the flights of stairs, knowing that if I wanted to get answers, infiltrating was the first step.

I had just taken a path I had never expected to take.

The Deciding Match

Every time I had a job to do, but wanted to drop everything and run, when I was too emotional to carry out anything, when I went on fighting sprees and started knocking out everyone I could find, when I thought life was pointless and wanted to drop dead, I always repeated those four words that Dad told me.

"Don't lose your way."

When I asked him what he meant by that, he told me it meant a bunch of things. It meant that I shouldn't waver from my objective, whatever it may be, but it also meant that I should never lose sight of what was really important, and that I should be ambitious and strive for greatness, but not forget myself in the process.

When Mikisugi asked me if I wanted revenge, it made me think. I could have stormed into the Kiryuin manor and started fighting and questioning people one by one, or came right up to Satsuki and forced her to come out with the truth, but that would have been reckless, getting caught up in my emotions and forgetting what was to be done, in other words, losing my way.

The testing room was a long and wide expanse of desks, pencils and pens, and students in varying uniforms, but there were a couple of kids without uniforms, they were most probably from colonies, like me. When I entered, I had to talk to some nerdy looking guy in a white suit, with glasses and blue hair. I had no idea why people in cities chose to dye their hair in gaudy and ridiculous colours; I guessed that it was a sign of privilege or something like that. There was a monitor in one of the walls which told the duration of the paper and how much time we had left.

I felt myself grow cold when I saw the room the first time; I was never one for schoolwork. If I'd been a human, I would have pretty much failed all my classes, but since Life Fibres increased cognitive capabilities and memory power, I was able to just barely pass in spite of rarely picking up my books. Maybe that was why I was hated. Even without trying, I would be better than some humans, and there was nothing they'd be able to do about it.

But at Life Fibre schools... a mere 50 percent average was not enough, and the curriculum in those schools was a whole other league. Even though I was sure I'd fail, I would have to try to take this exam if I wanted to infiltrate this school and get answers.

I sat down at the desk and saw the answer sheet, where I had to put all my personal details. When I looked at it, a thought came to me. The Kiryuins knew who my Dad was and what he did, if I put my real name on the test paper, Satsuki would know who I was. I had to come up with a pseudonym to avoid getting caught... but what would I use?

"Exactly right... Haruka-"

That name. It came to my head again. At the time it wasn't important, but now I couldn't help but wonder who that person was. No, it was obvious. That was Mom's name. Dad used to say

I was like her, and he never meant it as a compliment. He never even liked it when I talked about her...

I shook my head. I had to stop brooding, at least now I had a disguise. "Haruka Midorikawa" didn't sound like the name of an angry delinquent at all, which was exactly what I needed.

After that, everything was easy. I put my date of birth, my age, my previous school name, the type of school I studied in, and then I ticked the "orphan" box where I was supposed to put my parents' names. When I did that, I felt a twinge of pain. I imagined some of the other kids here were orphans too; losing your parents was commonplace nowadays. Finally I had to answer the question about my race. I heard in the past, "race" meant ethnicity, but nowadays it meant if you were a human or a hybrid. I knew just what not to choose.

I heard an alarm bell ring, and the screen at the back of the room showed two hours and thirty minutes, and began to count down. I picked up my pencil and started to work. There were six sections; two in mathematics, one Japanese, one English, and two science.

The math here was weird. At the colony we were doing basic equations and stuff like that, here they had to add calculus into the mix, which our school barely touched. Japanese wasn't that different from my old school, except all the passages were written vertically, making the questions a pain to read. English was where I felt I lucked out; I knew a few phrases and words, but not much, colonies didn't feel the need to teach students who would probably never see anything outside their hometown a global language. Science was a mess. Biology, chemistry, and physics questions were being thrown at us left, right, and centre, and sometimes they mixed all of them up in one question.

By the time two and a half hours passed, and the papers were taken away, I was dead. I highly doubted I'd pass this one, so I knew I'd have to rely on the combat trials. The blue-haired nerd announced that the tests would be fed into the computers and the results would be calculated and displayed on the screen and that the one who got the highest mark would be tested in combat first. I knew I was probably going dead last.

The results came on the board almost instantly, and even though I wasn't dead last, I was still near the bottom. 42 percent was better than I thought I would do, but by Honnouji standards, it was probably a bad grade.

It would be a few hours before I would get my chance. So I took this time to have a catnap at my desk. When I woke up, my name, or rather, my pseudonym was the next one on the board, and then I heard a voice from the speakers.

"Haruka Midorikawa."

It took me a few seconds before I realized that was my name, and then I went into the room next door. It looked like a gym, and I saw a guy with black hair up to his chin wearing a white kendo outfit. He was folding his arms and had a smug look on his face.

"Am I gonna have to fight you or what?"

He sighed and made a clicking sound with his tongue.

"If you fought me, you'd be dead in a minute. You're from one of the colonies, aren't you, New Girl? I'm not too surprised, wild humans have no manners."

It took a lot of effort for me to not talk back at him.

"But I'll give you some credit. You realized that Life Fibres are only here to help us humans, and that's why you're here, so you're not entirely stupid."

"Enough talk, now who's gonna be my opponent?"

He frowned and then glared at me angrily.

"You do realize who you're talking to, do you? Uzu Sanageyama, chairman of the Athletics Department, president of the Kendo Club, Lady Satsuki's right hand...?"

That name made me freeze, I began to shake and back away slowly.

"Ah... so you at least know who she is. I guess that settles that. You know your way around a fight?"

"I know how to fight with my bare hands, but I'm better with a sword."

"You know Kendo?"

"Nah. I don't follow any specific style, I taught myself."

Uzu chuckled and then sighed.

"Toin, step forward."

A skinny looking one-star student with short hair, like a buzz cut, stepped in front of me. He had a wooden kendo sword in his hand.

"My name is Masaya Toin of the Kendo Club, pleased to meet your acquaintance."

He bowed slightly, and then threw a wooden sword at me, which I caught. I didn't know why you had to assume all these courtesies with someone you had to fight.

I got myself ready, and Uzu held his hand up...

"Three, two, one-"

But before he could finish counting down, he turned around to the sound of clacking heels. He knelt down and stared at the floor, averting his eyes, Masaya did the same. I turned to the direction of the sound, and alarm bells started to ring in my head, and a voice began screaming at me to run.

The very person I was trying to avoid was staring squarely at me, and I was staring squarely at her. She had long jet black hair that ran past her waist, icy blue eyes, bushy eyebrows slightly covered by fringe, and an angular face. She was wearing a white blazer, white pants,

and white boots. With the amount of white she wore, you'd suspect she was trying to blind people.

"What do you think you're doing, New Girl?! Bow-"

Satsuki held out her hand to prevent Uzu from saying anything more. She began to pace the floor, and circle me like a vulture, eyeing me from top to bottom. If she was angry, she didn't give any indication. Her face was expressionless and cold.

My cover had been blown. She knew who I was, she knew it all. I had to get out of here, I had to get out-

"Look at me."

I was looking at my feet, I didn't want her to see the fear in my eyes.

"You don't appear to be deaf. Look at me."

I forced myself to look at her; she continued to circle me, her arms folded as she walked. As much as I hated to say it... we did share some physical similarities. We were both the same height, and I was always considered tall, we had the same bushy eyebrows. We even had the same eyes, except for the diamond-shaped brand that I had, which came with being a Hybrid.

But as far as similarities went, that was about it.

"Haruka Midorikawa, age 17. Date of birth: May 1st, 2255. Wild human, no parents, raised in Colony 52, and now a vagrant... am I right?"

The way she said "Haruka" and my date of birth made my skin crawl. She sounded like she was mocking me. I wasn't surprised that she knew this info though; Satsuki probably had access to everyone's test results and personal data.

I had a very strong feeling that she knew I was lying.

"I take your silence as a yes."

She began to intently stare at the clip in my hair, and then she started eyeing my outfit.

"You aren't particularly bright, but you seem... skilled. Unusually skilled for one of those pigs in human clothing, but one must not carelessly judge a book by its cover..."

Then she looked at my face, and then my outfit again, and then my hair, and moved back to my face. She sighed. If I didn't know better, I'd say she looked... disappointed, for some weird reason.

"Lady Satsuki, there's something suspicious about this girl, I can feel it-"

"Hold your tongue, Sanageyama."

She raised an eyebrow, she looked like she was thinking about something, almost as if she was... confused.

"You don't judge a book by its cover; you judge a book by its contents. I wish to observe this match. Carry on, Sanageyama."

She walked up to the bleachers and sat down, not taking her eyes off me.

I wanted to get out of here. Satsuki knew about me and why I was here, she wanted me dead, or worse, she wanted me to work for her. I had to run... I wanted to run. But I had to keep myself grounded, I had to remember what I came for, so I repeated those words in my head.

"Don't lose your way."

Masaya got back into position, and Uzu began to count down.

"3..."

"Don't lose your way."

"2..."

"Don't lose your way."

"1..."

"Don't lose your way...!"

"...Begin!"

I grabbed the wooden sword and lunged forth.

A Reluctant Transformation

Masaya was pretty damn fast, even while holding back because he wanted to follow the rules of Kendo.

When I ran at him after Uzu started counting down, he was able to dodge me by simply swerving out of the way. I tried to get him from the other side, but he managed to hit me on the head.

"Men."

When wild humans hit me, they barely left a scratch, but when this guy, a one star hit me, I ended up feeling quite a bit of pain and almost got flung over. I didn't want to know what fighting Dad's murderer would be like.

Luckily I bounced back and tried to hit him in the stomach. He ran a few steps back and then tried to hit me again. I got out of the way this time. I started to run the other way, but then he hit me in my ribs, catching me off guard.

"Dou."

One more hit and I'd lose the match, and I would as well have said goodbye to my chances of getting answers. I decided to really mess with him, just because Masaya was trying to be a good sport didn't mean that I should.

I started to run as fast as I could, circling him. He kept trying to run in between me, but I never gave him that opportunity by swerving around him as much as I could. Then when he was about to spin around his heels to pursue me, I tripped him with the kendo sword, and he fell down on his back.

"Kote!"

Okay, I knew you weren't supposed to say that after tripping your opponent, hell, you weren't even supposed to trip your opponent in Kendo, but I still always wanted to say that. Masaya had one hand on his back and another on his head, and he was staring at me angrily. Uzu was shocked; his face was red with fury.

"Disqualified! Disqualified! That's against the rules-"

"It's all right."

I was so engrossed in the match that I forgot that Satsuki was sitting right there in the bleachers, watching me like a hawk.

"Call Fukuroda here, she needs more of a challenge."

Uzu bowed and walked out of the room, a few minutes later, a short and stocky bald guy was with him. He was only wearing a cloak, a pair of trunks, and huge gloves, all in white.

"Well, this is a surprise; you're the first wild human I've met who could take on a one star, I think I'm going to find you interesting..."

I really didn't like the way he said that.

"Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"The president of the Boxing Club, can't you tell? Oh right, you've probably never seen a uniform in your life! Poor, poor thing, you must be trembling before its power as I speak!"

Actually I was wondering how someone can wander around in public so tackily dressed...

"Enough chatter, now let's do this."

I picked up the wooden kendo sword I had used earlier and ran at him, then something happened that I didn't expect. He hit me with a barrage of punches, each one more powerful than the last, and his gloves felt like hard steel ramming into my face and torso. He finished me off by punching me in the gut, and I landed flat on the floor. I couldn't feel my body at all, my vision was blurry, I felt nauseous, and dizzy, but I could hear just fine... and I wished he had punched out my ears too.

"Ha! Just as I thought! You're all bark and no bite!"

"Your test scores are abysmal... but for a wild human, you're decent in combat, even with unorthodox methods... but if Lady Satsuki were to let you in, I'd be very surprised-"

"She's in."

"Wh-What?!"

"I was hoping she'd prove to be more amusing... but alas, she is still green. No matter, if she wants to show us what she's made of, let her."

All their voices were like nails on a chalkboard, I wanted to silence them, all of them, with my own bare hands. I was trembling on the floor, trying to get up slowly.

"You... bastard..."

I pushed myself up with my hands, and I was kneeling. Then I stood up, but my legs were trembling and I was holding my right shoulder with my left hand, I knelt slightly to pick up the kendo sword with my right. I wasn't standing up completely though, and my vision was still a little blurry.

"I'm not... gonna let myself... be beaten by some two star who thinks he's all that!"

I felt queasy in the pit of my stomach, and then I started coughing, I felt liquid coming out of my mouth as I did. That was when my vision started coming back. I looked down at my uniform and saw a patch of red, and then I remembered what Mikisugi said...

"If you get that outfit of yours bloody, then well..."

Almost immediately after, my uniform started to expand. The sleeves began to morph so that my entire arm, including my hands, were completely covered, then the skirt morphed into leggings, covering the entire bottom half of my body, and then I was covered in cloth from the chin down. Then it started to tighten until it was practically clinging to my skin... no, wait, until it may as well have been my second skin.

It was chafing, stifling. It was as if the outfit was trying to swallow me up, or trying to drain my blood like a vampire. The cloth started digging into me, and I began to struggle against it, but in vain, the damn thing wouldn't budge.

"Get off me..."

It refused to move, getting tighter by the second.

"Get off..."

Then threads came up from the neck, and it started to cover my head, eventually, it would cover my entire face too.

"GET OFF!"

Then I lost consciousness...

There is nothing but red.

Red strings everywhere, covering my entire body, covering the entire landscape, they're everywhere... everywhere...

"Surrender..."

Who the hell is that?

"Yes! Yes! Surrender, flesh-being! Become one with us, merge with us completely!"

I know what those high pitched screams are, my internal Life Fibres have tried to take me over before... but then... who's the other voice?

"Oh, what's this? How intriguing... a cross-breed. Neither of blood nor of fibre..."

Who is this? Who's in my head?

"Well, it's no wonder I was able to last this long... had you been a flesh-being, I'd have consumed you right then and there..."

It's the uniform... it's the uniform... it wants to consume me... it wants me to succumb... it wants to erase me completely...

"What do you call yourself, cross-breed?"

"How is that any of your business? Get out of my head! Get out and stay out! If you want a body, find one of those Kiryuin goons and latch on to them, not me!"

"We can only accept the blood of the first person who offered themselves to us."

"Hold up, uniforms don't work like that!"

"Listen to him, flesh-being! Let him become one with us, make him one of us!"

"We are unadulterated. We form when what you call Life Fibres are stitched together to create a single stream of consciousness."

"Make him one with us flesh-being! Listen to us flesh-being!"

"Unadulterated... you mean... you're all Life Fibres? You... you don't even contain Greysilk?!"

"Precisely... now go on, you've managed to last long even for a cross-breed. Let me take you over-"

"NO WAY IN HELL, YOU FILTHY ALIEN PARASITE!"

I could see the gym again.

All my wounds were healed, and I felt much stronger, but also drained like there were little syringes all over my body that were slowly taking out my blood. My breasts and lower body felt bound as if I was wearing a bikini that was far too tight for me. The rest of my body felt cold, cold and bare.

I looked down, and the form that this uniform took may as well have been a way-too-tight bikini. Both the top and bottom consisted of nothing but red strings coiling around the parts of my body that needed to be covered. The cloth was clinging to my body, digging into my skin and not letting go.

Wait... the uniform, instead of consuming me... changed itself so that I may as well be in my underwear?!

"You wanted complete control, so I changed my form accordingly."

It talked. It was talking in my head.

"Okay, what's the big deal here? What exactly are you?!"

"No need to shout. I can speak to you in your mind, so you can just do the same."

"Great, now you're telling me you're a telepath?!"

"I can only do this because of the high percentage of Life Fibres in your brain. Now, where was I...? Ah yes, I couldn't consume you as you are, you're too strong, so I decided to bond

with you instead. Flesh-beings are strange for considering certain parts of the body taboo, but I chose to keep them in mind when I fit myself to you."

"Gee, thanks for the concern."

"I detect what you flesh-beings call sarcasm in your speech, rather, your thoughts."

"Keep quiet you parasite! I have a fight to win here-"

"A fight I can help you with, in exchange for a body."

"...What?"

"You are debating whether to take my help or not. Hmmm... you seek out the culprit for the murder of a parental figure, am I correct?"

"I wish you weren't a telepath."

"There are many things about flesh-beings I do not understand, but I do understand the need of flesh-beings to search for answers, or as you would call it, human curiosity. You are able to control me, and I respect you for that, so I'll lend you my strength."

"Hey, wait, what the?!"

The uniform was silent.

I almost forgot about the people around me, and I looked. Uzu's jaw was slack, the boxer dude was pointing at me, and Satsuki was still staring at me and scrutinizing every aspect of my appearance, only this time, she was smiling.

"I-impossible..."

Wait a minute... the uniform said that only a hybrid would last this long while wearing it... the look on each of their faces meant that they knew what this uniform was... which meant that now my cover was really blown.

Everyone knew I was a hybrid, and it was only a matter of time before Satsuki would cart me off to REVOCS for testing... if I let her do it that is. I decided I didn't care if she knew or not, I was going to stand my ground and fight for my life.

"Well... this changes everything, Haruka Midorikawa... if that is your real name."

I decided to up the ante; I took the scissor blade out of my pocket, as I had shrunk it down before, and let it expand to normal size. Then I pointed it at Satsuki.

"Shut up, bitch! If you wanna make me one of your little pets, you'll have to take me down first!"

Uzu and the boxer dude gasped, then they ran to the bleachers and stood in front of Satsuki protectively.

"You dare speak that way to Lady Satsuki?! You deserve no mercy for that!"

Satsuki held her hand out; Uzu stopped talking but was still on the edge.

"You will not speak until I give you permission, understood?"

They both nodded, and then Satsuki stepped down from the bleachers, and stopped walking when we were only a foot or so away from each other. I got in a defensive position and started glaring at her.

"The Rending Scissors... Ishin Matoi's most prized invention... or at least, what's left of it. Interesting... you're the first hybrid I've encountered to actively oppose your own kind..."

I lunged towards her with my scissor blade aimed at her neck.

"Ishin Matoi was my dad, and one of your cronies killed him!"

She dodged me and then stabbed me in the stomach with the hilt of her sword; I stumbled over and knelt down.

"Then Ishin has concealed you well... but you're pathetic. You have a Kamui but don't even know how to use it. You're going to have to do better than that if you want to land a hit on me, hybrid."

I got up from the floor and started to charge towards her.

"My name is Ryuko!"

She used her sword to block my scissor blade. I couldn't believe it; she managed to give me a tough time without breaking a sweat... and she was completely human.

"You want to oppose me so badly, Ryuko Matoi?"

"I want revenge! You know who killed my dad, don't you? Tell me who did it so I can give her what she deserves!"

"And why do you think I have this information?"

"Because the killer was one of your pet hybrids!"

Satsuki chuckled as though I said something really stupid, then she lunged at me and I was thrown half a foot back. Satsuki started walking back to the bleachers.

"Fukuroda, step forward. I believe Ryuko Matoi desires a rematch."

With lightning speed he jumped down, now he was right in front of me, and leering at me. I didn't want to be reminded of the fact that I was half-naked.

"You and your underhanded tactics! Now you're trying to distract me with your body, aren't you?"

"You love to hear yourself talk, don't you, you pervert?"

I didn't think he liked being called that, so he started running towards me, I braced myself for his punches.

"I'm gonna enjoy beating you a second time!"

A Life for a Life

"...I'm gonna enjoy beating you a second time!"

I stood my ground for his barrage of attacks, expecting to be thrown to the side like I was earlier, but surprisingly, the boxer dude's punches barely hurt; in fact, they didn't hinder me at all, and I was fast enough to dodge most of them. It seemed that wearing something as skimpy as this was a small price to pay for that kind of strength.

The boxer dude looked at me dumbstruck, but kept fighting anyway. He ran towards me and tried to hit me in the stomach, but I flipped over and evaded him. It was a close call though, as his fists barely grazed me before I got out of the way.

My form bothers you, does it not, Cross-Breed?

You again?!

You did not expect me to strike up a conversation with you at this time.

Oh really? Gee, I couldn't tell! And my name's Ryuko, not 'cross-breed,' so stop calling me that!

The boxer dude started hitting me with rapid speed again, and I was using my scissor blade to block his attacks, but I was sure he'd eventually find an opening.

This flesh-being is very strong but very stupid. He fights you as though he is fighting a rock.

What does that even mean?

Sure enough, he tried to hit me in the face, but I managed to swerve out of the way and kick him in the torso, and he fell over. He got up, but he was pretty weak, I was sure I had at least bruised him, but he ran at me and tried to punch me again.

"How are you able to evade my Iron Fist Barrage?!"

He was practically screaming in my face, it was getting a little ridiculous.

"Really...? You actually name your attacks? Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Someone who has seen what you obviously cannot! Humanity's..."

He punched me in the shoulder, I winced, but it didn't hurt that much. I used my scissor blade to graze his arm, there was a bit of blood.

"Progress..."

He tried to hit me in the face, but I swerved out of the way again.

"Depends..."

He tried to hit me in the stomach again, but to no avail.

"On..."

Finally I was getting sick of playing cat and mouse with him and did a forward roll to the side so that there would be more of a gap between us. But he ran towards me and tried to hit me again.

"...LIFE FIBRES! Those who deny this fact only wish to send all of humankind back to the STONE AGES!"

And once again he resumed his whole 'iron fist barrage' crap.

He's treating me like a punching bag! This guy has zero creativity!

...I was trying to tell you just that.

Okay, so I can't keep toying with him, how do I finish him off?

His uniform is the source of his strength. Find the nexus thread, and sever it.

What the hell is a nexus thread?

Sever it, and a uniform is torn asunder.

So... it's his Achilles Heel?

...Come again?

His weak point.

Correct.

So, how do I find it?!

I will assist you in that endeavour...

Suddenly my vision went black-and-white, but I saw two bright red lines in each of the boxer dude's gloves, almost immediately after noticing this, my vision turned back to normal, and the boxer dude was still trying to hit me.

...The shorts do nothing. His gloves are his uniform.

I am surprised you did not figure that out earlier.

Wait... how the hell did that happen anyway?

I can control the Life Fibres inside you so that you see as we do, albeit temporarily. Now enough idle prattle, focus on your opponent.

I jumped into the air as high as I could, for a minute the boxer dude looked up at me, and then tried to use an uppercut, but I cut through his gloves before he could act, and both of them turned to streams of cloth and fell to the floor. He began to tremble and shake a bit, and knelt down and started to cry like a small child.

"How... how did you..."

Then he screamed at me and buried his face in his hands. I didn't want to think like this, but I kind of felt sorry for him. I heard that if students from higher tiers started falling back in their performance, they'd be sent to the slums. I was pretty sure that fate was waiting for him.

Suddenly I felt strings crawling all over my body, and saw that the uniform started to take on its original appearance. I almost immediately felt weak and drained and knelt down because my legs gave way. When I looked up, Satsuki was right in front of me.

"Of course a hybrid such as yourself would be able to see nexus threads..."

I didn't even have the energy to glare at her or come up with some kind of insult.

"...but you have no idea how to control your weapon, do you? You little fool..."

That was the last thing I heard before I blacked out.

"Half-Breed!"

The buck-toothed kid throws a dodge ball at my face. It should hurt real bad, but it doesn't.

"Didn't you hear, this place is for humans only! Go back to space and never come back!"

The girl with the really bad hair throws stones at me; I feel blood trickle down my forehead.

"Get out! Get out! We don't need Hybrids here!"

One of them kicks sand in my eyes, and another one kicks me so I fall on the floor with my face in the dirt.

"Evil savage!"

They all start kicking my back to make sure I stay down.

"Freak!"

"Alien slave!"

One pushes my head down into the sand, I feel suffocated.

"I bet she works for the rainbow lady!"

"Yeah! And I bet she'll call her little COVER buddies for backup and turn us into slaves!"

"She can't stay here!"

"Kill the hybrid! Kill the hybrid! Kill the hybrid!"

I lose control of myself, my vision goes red and I start beating them all senseless, screaming all the way. Once they're all bloody and battered, I hop the fence and run, far, far away. I just want to beat up something, anything at all. I'm so angry with everything, with humans, with Life Fibres, with the world, with Dad. I just want it all to burn, I want all of them to burn in hell.

I see two people coming my way, they look human, but they aren't. One's got pink hair and eyes, the other's got orange. They're saying something. Their voices are strange, it's like they're making whirring noises and talking at the same time. I don't care. I don't care what they're saying. I just want to beat them all. I run at them and attack them in blind rage.

I feel them come at me and I black out...

I don't know how long I was out, but I'm hearing voices. I can't see much though.

"Oh dear... she's been beaten quite badly."

"Whaddaya expect from a pair of COVERS?"

"Didn't they all go away after the war?"

"Well it looks like the Kiryuins are tryin' to bring 'em back."

I feel something licking my face, and my vision comes back. A pug is sitting on my chest, staring square at me. I'm too disoriented to mind, and besides, I don't hate animals, in fact, they can be better than humans most of the time.

"Well, it looks like Guts managed to wake you up!"

I see a woman with chestnut brown hair with a baby in her lap, she looks too refined to be from a place like this, and a slightly chubby looking man in a white coat. Next to them is a girl around my age, and a boy who looks a little bit older. The dog gets off me and walks to the girl, then takes a seat next to her.

"You had a bad spill there, girl. I doubt you were in your right mind there, takin' on a pair of COVERS like that. If my daughter here hadn't found you, you'd be dead by now."

I look at my body, which is covered in bandages, and I look up at the man.

"Who are you?"

"I'm a back alley doctor, Barazo Mankanshoku. That's my wife, Sukuyo. That's Masaomi, Mako, and little Mataro over there..."

"How'd I get here?"

"I carried you here, of course, and Daddy patched you up! You have to be more careful, it's getting really dangerous now and Mommy says we should stay within the colony borders!"

"Which colony are you from, dear? I've never seen you before..."

Why are these people so concerned about me? How does it matter to them if I live or die? They're humans, and humans hate hybrids... they all do... they're all the same...

"You're... not... scared of me?"

"Why should we be scared? You don't look like a threat to me."

"But... I'm a hybrid... and humans hate hybrids. Nobody likes me. Nobody wants to be my friend because they all think I'm evil, they all want me dead..."

I start to cry, this doesn't make any sense. Dad left me to rot in this hellhole and be hated and picked on. People aren't supposed to care about me, this is weird, this shouldn't be happening. Why is it happening?

"Oh, don't cry. I know, I'll be your friend!"

I stop crying and only look at Mako, nobody has ever said those words to me before.

"It's only because you live in this wretched hive that you're treated like that. We all hate this place, that's why I'm studying real hard now, so I can pass my evaluation and me and my family can go to Honnouji Academy, hey, you should go there too, I hear Hybrids get the VIP treatment there!"

"That's not what Dad said, he said that the Kiryuins take Hybrids away and experiment on them-"

"That's what they all say, your dad's probably just jealous-"

Mako's mom doesn't seem to like that, so she pinches the older boy's ear.

"Masaomi!"

"All right, all right! I'm sorry! Jeez..."

Suddenly I hear a knock at the door. Mako's mom puts the baby on her husband's lap and then goes to check it, and a minute later, she comes out and Dad's standing right there.

"Ryuko!"

He runs towards me. Yes, he finally shows concern for me when I'm on the brink of death. Some father he is. I don't even know how he managed to find me, but I don't really think about it. Mako's dad looks around and then asks Dad if he wants to be alone with me. He says yes, and then Mako and her family leave the room.

"Why are you here? You don't care about me! You leave me with people who hate me; it's all your fault! I hate you!"

He slaps me and grabs my shoulders.

"Remember what I told you, Ryuko."

Why does he make me do this whenever we talk, if we talk at all? It's a pointless exercise.

"...Don't lose your way."

"But you did just that today, you could have died!"

"I know that! What does that stupid saying even mean anyway?!"

Dad's silent for a while, he looks sad.

"It means you need to have a grip over yourself, over the Life Fibres inside you. Hold on to your sense of self, Ryuko. You never know when you may start to fade away..."

Satsuki let me go.

She could have killed me, she had the opportunity, but she didn't. She let me go. Why? I was her enemy; I was out to find out her dirty secrets, I was Ishin Matoi's daughter, so... why? What was her motivation for sparing me? Trying to find out why was driving me insane.

When I looked at my surroundings, I felt a sense of déjà vu, and then I knew what it was. Mako's dad, her mom, and Mataro were standing around me, and Guts was at my feet, just like they were that day. But I noticed something was missing... but what?

"How... how did I-"

"Mataro found you lying unconscious in the tramway, don't know how you got there though..."

He sighed and began to look around impatiently, guess he was waiting for something.

"It's been eight years since then... and you haven't changed a bit. What, get into another fight?"

I told him how I ended up in Honnouji and my reason for being here, leaving out the details of the fight with the boxer dude and Satsuki on my tail. I remembered that Mikisugi told me not to get Mako involved in this mess.

Speaking of which... where was she?

"So you think the guy who killed Ishin is somewhere around here? Well, I can't guarantee your success, but I can wish you good luck, I guess..."

"Where's Mako?"

"She should be home by now; I wonder what's wrong..."

Then I remembered Barazo's firstborn child, and his dream of coming here, hoping to make it big...

"And Masaomi...?"

Mako's mom flinched and looked a little uneasy. Then he sighed in resignation.

"Oh, uh, well... I like to think he's someplace nice... maybe he's a two-star, or a three-star, maybe he's in Tokyo, or workin' for REVOCS... but I believe I can dream... I guess..."

I figured something was up with Masaomi that nobody was going to tell me about, or maybe he was dead and they didn't want to believe it. I decided to leave the matter for now. I got up, feeling a bit more energetic, and decided to walk about, hoping to get my muscles moving again.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm not going anywhere; I'd just like to walk around, I feel like I need to get my muscles going."

I walked out the door and started to walk about the narrow hall, going over what happened during the fight I last had in my head.

You passed out because I need to take blood from you in order for you to access my power.

I almost forgot about the uniform, or the Kamui, as Satsuki called it.

So you really ARE a parasite...

I prefer the term symbiote if you don't mind.

Shut your filthy mouth-

I do not have a mouth to speak with, remember?

Right...

Also, there is something you must know. Since our minds are connected, I was able to look through your memories. I remember that the man who created me was the very same parental figure whose death you seek to avenge.

I figured, Dad told me to take you... before he died, and Mikisugi mentioned about you in passing. But I don't understand why I have to be half-naked in order to operate you. I swear Dad had a sick sense of humour.

I told you, I change my form according to how much control you have over yourself. Since you wanted complete control, I took on this form. This is how all of us operate.

...So the less ground you cover, the more control I have?

Precisely.

Well, I don't like it.

Your preference is irrelevant here. Oh, and there's something else I remember, but not from your memories. I faintly recall another Kamui being created with me, but I am not sure, I seem to have gaps in my consciousness...

Why would Dad create two of these things? Maybe you're remembering it wrong.

Perhaps, perhaps not. Ryuko...

That's the first time you've used my name.

I am aware. I understand you flesh-beings feel the need to identify yourselves using these... names. I would also like a name too, if you don't mind.

I'm no good at names.

Anything will do.

What are you anyway, male, female?

How is this relevant?

Men and women have different names.

Kamui do not technically have genders... but since you asked, I choose to identify as male.

That makes your appearance when you transform even worse...

So what have you decided, for my name I mean?

...Senketsu.

Senketsu?

It means, 'fresh blood,' since you require blood to be activated and all.

Very well, I will take it.

"RYUKO!"

Mataro's scream brought me back to reality. I ran to the living room to see what was wrong, and I saw all the members of Mako's family staring at the television agape.

I saw Mako tied to a stake, and a pit of boiling water below, next to it was that Sanageyama guy from before, and high above the whole scene was Satsuki, staring down at the people she oppressed.

"This is a message for Ryuko Matoi, if you wish to see your friend alive, come to Honnouji Academy and save her with your own two hands. I will be waiting."

I didn't want to get Mako involved in this mess... but there she was. Now her life was on the line because of me, I had no other choice but to go back.

Into the Fire

"The Star-System that we have today and its inception can be traced back to the early 21st century. After the reunification of the Korean Peninsula, the Southern half chose to only open its borders to those deemed healthy enough to cross. Those who were proven worthy were given Bio-Fibre robes, or 5% Life Fibre induced clothing as we know them today. This selective immigration process formed the basis for demarcating nations into socio-economic zones..."

Mr. Mikisugi's droning is rather tiresome, even more so than usual, even though I'm pretty sure nothing had changed about him. Maybe it's because I'm not too keen on concentrating the lecture; there are other things on my mind at the moment.

For instance, I'm pretty curious about his conversation with Ryuko and what it entailed. I want to know if Mr. Mikisugi had given her too much information... if he had mentioned me, to be more precise. Well, Mr. Mikisugi only started teaching last year, so I'm pretty sure he doesn't know that much. Besides, they don't let teachers look at everything in the Student Database... or do they?

Ryuko's presence as a whole is also giving me a bit of trouble. When I saved her and when she stayed at our house all those years ago, I was happy to have someone to call a friend. But now... now that everything's changed, and that so much has happened to our family, I don't know if I can trust her. What if she really is pro-Life Fibres? What if she turns out to be like...?

No. No, I can't afford to let myself be carried away by negative energy. No matter how the world may be, no matter how little we have, no matter how bleak or hopeless a situation may be, I have to keep smiling. It's the only way I can stay sane, the only way I can survive. I have to look at the positives in my life, even though there aren't many.

The bell rings for lunch hour, and that's a signal for me to get out of the class. The other No-Stars talk amongst themselves, not too sure about what though. I don't really know what people my age get together and speak about. I once read that in the old days, humans used the internet, books, and television for entertainment, but Life Fibres think that entertainment is useless, so now they're only used to impart knowledge. No-Stars don't get much access to technology... so they can't talk about that. We're pretty locked out of the loop when it comes to the news as well, nobody here likes to speak about marks, and when you're poor social dramas are the least of your concerns, so... what do they talk about?

I shake my head in order to get such brooding thoughts out of my mind, and decide to focus on happier things, like the croquettes Mom packed me for lunch...

"Mankanshoku..."

I turn around and see him. He's really tall and burly for his age; he's got naturally blonde hair, black eyes, a bit of a tan, a perpetual scowl, and the standard uniform of Honnouji's higher tiers.

I put on my best smile as I try to discreetly inch from him, and try even harder to repress the uncomfortable memories.

"Gamagoori! What brings you here? As you can see, I'm not breaking the rules or anything! Did you want to try some of my croquettes-"

"Come with me. Lady Satsuki wishes to speak to you."

I smile so much that I feel like my face is going to snap in two.

"Why does Lady Satsuki wanna speak to me? I'm just a No-Star-"

"I can tolerate many things, Mankanshoku, but I can't tolerate those who wish to live in denial. Come with me."

I oblige and decide to follow him, like any other No-Star would. He accompanies me to the lift and presses the button that leads to the top floor.

"Mankanshoku..."

"Huh?"

"Why did you do it?"

I play dumb.

"Do what?"

"You had so much, you could have been somebody... but you decided to give it all up."

I don't answer him. I hear the sound of the elevator coming to a stop.

"You wish not to speak of it, eh?"

I pretend as if he never opened his mouth and just keep following him. He asks me to wait, and I do just that. I sense that someone's behind me, they've probably got a weapon too. But I don't want to fight them. Besides, I no longer have the means needed to defend myself against them.

I feel something stabbing me in my arm, and I black out...

"...So you decided to show up after all, Ryuko Matoi."

The sight of Mako about to be scalded to death in the central grounds while high and low tier students alike were watching was bad enough. Looking at Satsuki's smug and arrogant expression as she stood atop that pillar was even worse.

"And decided to stoop that low huh? Leave Mako out of this! This fight is between the two of us!"

"...so the Mankanshoku girl really is important to you, is she?"

I got out my scissor blade and pointed it at her.

"Shut your trap and face me!"

"I told you, Matoi. You're going to have to do better than this if you want to land a hit on me. How about I have you pick on somebody your own size..."

She snapped her fingers as though to call another one of her goons to her aid.

"Hakodate, step forward."

Sure enough, I saw a figure come out from the entrance of the academy. Her blonde hair was in two pony-tails, she wore a white tennis uniform, carried a satchel that slung around her shoulder, and had a yellow tennis bat in her hand, but it didn't look like any normal bat. It was huge, almost as big as my scissor blade, it was sparkling and the net, despite appearing to be made of string, looked extremely durable.

The bat's made of Life Fibres.

I thought so, wait, is that where her Nexus Thread is?

Her uniform is also made of Life Fibres, so I do not know. It takes time to pinpoint the location of Nexus Threads. Sometimes uniforms will have more than one...

Oh great, thanks for telling me this NOW...

Just try to distract this one until I can locate the Threads, in the meantime, try not to die. If you perish, I won't be able to find another host.

Duly noted.

The girl was standing a few feet away from me now, and she started glaring.

"I'm Omiko Hakodate, president of the Tennis Club. If you want to save your friend, you'll have to go through me!"

Without hesitation, I used the scissor blade to make a mild cut in my arm, and then pressed the wound to Senketsu, hoping that it would work. Luckily, he started to expand and turn into strings again, but I was able to control him so that he took on the same form as he did before... a form that I forgot how much I disliked.

I heard wolf-whistling and cheers in the background, mostly from boys, but some girls were also a part of it, and the tennis girl started to laugh.

"You're... going to fight me... in a bathing suit?! Wow... you clearly have no shame!"

"It's called a Kamui! And it's not like I'm wearing this because I want to!"

The tennis girl scoffed at me and took a ball out of her satchel, then got in a position to attack me.

"Fukuroda may have fallen for your tricks, but I'm much smarter! There's only one Kamui in existence, and that belongs to Mistress Ragyo. So shut up and spare me your lies!"

She served the ball straight at me. I tried to block it but to no avail. I was hit smack in the face and thrown a few feet away and was now flat on my back.

She's wrong, Ryuko.

I know that, but does she?

Ryuko, watch out!

The tennis girl started to run towards me, presumably to finish me off. I got up just in time and jumped out of the way. She got out another ball, but this time she tried a different manoeuvre. She served the ball so that it took a curved path right towards my stomach. I tried using the scissor blade to hit it back to her, but it just cut through the ball.

This flesh-being is indeed smarter than the last. Do not expect her to repeat the same manoeuvres ad nausem.

The tennis girl got out three balls from her satchel and served each one almost immediately after the previous one, and all three of them were aimed at me. I was able to cut through the one aiming for my head and the one aiming for my side, but the one aiming for my right leg hit, and I ended up kneeling down.

She wasn't like the boxer dude at all.

Have you decided to make that your job, stating out the obvious?

I'm only pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of your adversary.

The tennis girl ran towards me, but I noticed that she would always keep her distance so that she could serve another ball at me. I cut through the next ball that came my way and started thinking of how to land a hit on her.

This flesh-being however, is not suited for close combat. If you can close the gap between you, you might have a chance.

Have you found her Nexus Thread yet?

Then my vision changed and I saw one yellow streak and two white ones; one across the net of the tennis bat, another where the tennis girl's belly was, and another on the hem of her skirt. My vision went back to normal as quickly as it changed.

How the hell am I going to hit those?! Knowing her, she's going to block those spots!

Only COVERS can see them, and Hybrids can see them only in special circumstances. She most likely doesn't even know where her Threads are.

Better see if you're right...

"What? You still can't attack me? I'm surprised you managed to defeat Fukuroda! Maybe that was beginner's luck!"

I decided to beat her at her own game. I let her hit me this time. I got up almost immediately, and I decided to carry out my plan.

Senketsu, can Kamui regenerate?

Only if you don't cut their Nexus Threads... why? Oh... I understand. My Nexus Thread is close to the bottom half, steer clear from there.

I nodded and shrunk the scissor blade down, and cut a few threads from the top part, then tied them into the loop of the scissor and expanded the blade to make a makeshift tennis bat. The next time she hit a ball at me, I used the makeshift tennis bat I had made to aim the ball right into the centre of her bat.

"Ha! Like that's going to do anything-"

When she saw the tennis bat fly out of her hands, which gave me an opportunity to run to it and cut its Nexus Thread, so that it would be rendered useless, she was forced to eat her words. She stood trembling for only a second, then clenched her hands into fists and tried to maintain a smug façade.

I couldn't celebrate just yet though, there were two more Nexus Threads to go.

"No matter, I'll just beat you to a bloody pulp then!"

She was fast, but her punches were nothing compared to the boxer dude, and I managed to slice through both the Threads. She was shocked, angry, sad, but most of all humiliated as she crouched down, trying to cover as much of her bare body as she could.

Senketsu reverted back to normal, and I felt my stamina plummet. My legs gave way again and I too was kneeling on the floor.

Flesh-Beings are indeed strange...your defeated adversary feels shame over her body, and your shame over your supposed lack of coverage is hindering my capabilities... yes, your kind is very odd indeed-

Keep... quiet...

I didn't plan on going down just yet. I used whatever energy I had left to see if Mako was okay. Satsuki gestured to the Sanageyama guy and pointed to the stake where Mako was.

"Matoi has proven her worth. The Mankanshoku girl is now of no use to us. Send her home."

Sanageyama nodded and ordered for the water pit to be sent away, then pressed a button behind the stake, and Mako was released from her shackles and fell to the floor. A couple of one-stars carried her to where the tramway was.

Satsuki was still standing there, unperturbed, with her standard contemptuous smile.

"Matoi, do not think you are done. You said you wanted to know who murdered Ishin Matoi, and you believe that I have the answers you seek, am I right? Well, fight for these answers, for they will not be handed to you so easily."

Strings of Fate

Soroi leads me to the ground floor, to an isolated corridor, and asks me to press a button on the doorway, it opens.

I recognize the room immediately, this was my late father's lab, and this place, along with my mother's chambers and the baths are the only places in the mansion that lack cameras.

I look at Soroi, he is crying. I don't understand why. I am the one who has to suffer, not him.

"Why must you be sad? Adults do not cry."

"...how long?"

I understand what he is referring to, just hours prior; he had borne witness to its aftermath. I begin to sob and cover my body as best as I can.

"Three years."

"I... I cannot protect you, Miss. However, I can tell you why this is happening."

"Why?"

He struggles to say the words.

"It's the Life Fibres way of showing their dominion over those they deem inferior."

It takes a while for me to process his words, but once I do, something happens. I realize how things really are.

I deserve what I'm going through. I suffer because I'm submissive. Because I make it clear that I'll be no more than a victim. If I hide my shame, my self-hatred, I'll no longer be tormented. If I discard all feeling, compassion, if I develop an iron resolve, if I show disdain for those like me, those who are also weak, then everything will change.

Knowing this changes me. My voice isn't a high pitched croak laced with fear, I'm no longer staring at my feet, and I'm no longer uncertain. Now I speak in a low monotone, I am standing tall, I am determined.

For the first time in my ten years of life, I am strong.

"Then that means... it's because I'm weak. It'll stop if I'm strong. This is something that's done to weak people to keep them in place. But I don't want to be like that. Tell me, Soroi. Tell me, how can I be strong?"

He nods and asks me to press a button near a closed display. The display opens, revealing a white outfit with a blue sailors' collar, which strangely resembled eyes. To its side, there is a long sword. I stare at it; I had never seen anything so beautiful in my life.

I want to wear that outfit... no. I must wear it.

"Your father's invention. The Kamui is a uniform to be worn solely by Hybrids. He made this one before he died. It was meant to be for you, but... the experiment failed."

"I'm aware that I'm a failed product."

"There's... also something else you need to know."

"Tell me."

"Haruka went under the knife as well."

And then he begins his story...

"...A one-hundred percent match."

I normally wouldn't allow anyone to see these results; however, Iori was an exception. Since we were raised together as children, I knew he could be trusted.

I told him not to make a show of it, but perhaps I had expected too much. He was shaking as he held the tablet in his hands, his eyes were wide, and his face was pale. On and off, he would look at me, and then look at the tablet, and then move back to me, trying to look for some kind of resemblance. Then again, while I had a suspicion from the beginning, I had trouble taking in the information myself.

"But... but... that's not possible-"

"What did I tell you before I brought you the samples?"

He averted his gaze in fear.

"...take them to the lab for testing, give you the results immediately, don't ask questions, and most importantly, do not tell anyone else."

"Correct."

I took the tablet from his hands and began to scroll through it. Then I walked out of the room with it, ready to carry out the next step in my plan. I took the lift to the ground floor and then gestured to Soroi, who was waiting outside with the family car.

"Let's go."

It usually took an hour and a half to go to the Kiryuin manor from here, but the ride felt as if it had gone on for days. After seemingly aeons, I was greeted with the steel-plated gates, the lavish garden with flowers of all kinds, and the gigantic wooden door with gold-plated handles. I took care to leave the tablet with Soroi so that nobody else could know such crucial

information, and then I braced myself as I walked in. This place was a heaven to many, many envied me for living here, and many wanted this place for themselves. Yet to me, it was a gateway to hell.

The maids bowed down and greeted me with as much respect and courtesy as they could muster, and I walked to my late father's lab, and opened it. I knew that this room would only accept mine, my late father's, or my mother's fingerprints, so I didn't have to worry about that meddling Takaji or any of my mother's associates interfering. I didn't even have to worry about my mother herself. She had gone to the United States for a conference at the Spectrum Alliance and wouldn't be back for weeks.

Had I been a success, my mother would have forced me into that Kamui when I'd come of age. Since I was obviously neither hybrid nor of age, I was forbidden to wear it. I was the sole successor to the Kiryuin family, far too valuable to lose, and no use to anyone if I turned into a COVER.

However, I knew how to prevent that from happening. In addition to having a strong body and mind, had a set of words to hold on to so that I wouldn't go off the deep end, so that I would still remember who I am.

I repeated those words in my head like a refrain as I gingerly took the Kamui out of the display, and then I changed into it. Then I fixed the blue glove with spikes and a switch-like knife onto my hand, I turned the switch. I knew what would happen next, I had seen it before.

The Kamui sprung to life, its threads enveloped my entire body, starting with the lower half, and then moving to my upper half, and then my neck...

Then I could see nothing.

A sea of blue strings...

They're just lying there...

"Awaken!"

It's... it's speaking to me? And I can understand what it says? This doesn't make sense. I'm no hybrid... this shouldn't be happening.

"Wake up from your endless sleep! Wake up so we may become one!"

'Endless sleep...?'

The strings begin to stir... so this is what it means... the blue strings... the Life Fibres... are sleeping.

Wait, what does that mean?

"Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!"

It can't be... there's just no way...

"Wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!"

They begin to slither like snakes; I feel them coiling around me...

"You have slept too long! Wake up!"

"SHUT UP!"

The voice stops.

"Hybrid or no, dormant or awake, you are meant to be worn, and I will bend you to my will!"

My vision returned, but I wasn't sure what to make of what happened.

My body felt cold but free. I looked down and saw that the Kamui had taken on a different form; it was only covering the necessary areas of my body, almost like a bathing suit. However, bathing suits did not cling to your body so tightly that you couldn't get them off.

It took me only a few seconds to realize that I was practically naked. Instinct made me feel a vulnerability I had tried to forget for years. I suddenly felt weak, submissive, open to attack, and I began to hate this outfit for making me feel like that, and I began to hate myself...

But I had to suppress this instinct if I wanted to carry out with my plans.

Contact

When I came to, it was morning. Guts was barking at me and Mako was scrambling about the house to get ready for school and trying to convince Mataro to do the same. Mako looked just as cheerful as always, as if she was never in a near-death situation. I always wondered how they did it, how they managed to be so cheerful in spite of how rough their lives were.

"Ryuko, hurry up! You don't wanna get expelled, do you?" Mako warned me as she hurriedly shoved the textbooks and notebooks on the floor into her schoolbag.

I groggily looked down and saw that I was wearing a pair of orange pajamas; the shirt had rabbit designs on it.

"Oh that? Mom put your uniform in the wash and changed you into this. It's a hand-me-down, I hope you don't mind."

"...where's the bathroom?"

"Outside."

Sure enough, when I walked out of the room and opened the back door, there was a small shack, and next to it, a clothesline, I saw Senketsu hanging there and my suitcase was underneath. Inside was a toilet, a sink, and a shower. They looked old and ill-maintained, but that was to be expected and nothing I wasn't used to. I got ready as fast as I could and walked back to Mako's room.

Ryuko, I request that henceforth, you don't leave me in that woman's care. She douses me in sludge water and coats me in chemicals. I find it most uncomfortable, not to mention hazardous-

Stop whining. And those chemicals are called soap. Clothes get dirty, you know, and need to be washed regularly.

We are not clothing.

They think you are.

Why not tell them otherwise?

They won't believe me. They've been living in the city for so long that what they know about Life Fibers and what we know is incredibly different. They don't know how COVERS are made, and they don't even know about the whole consumption deal.

They are unaware that we consume our hosts should they be too weak to hold us?

Look, if that information got out, would people wear Life Fiber induced clothing? The only reason why my dad knew was because he conducted studies on Life Fibres in secret.

Indeed, you are right. On another note, what are you planning to do henceforth... regarding your plan to avenge your father's death?

No idea.

Not having a plan is unwise.

I'm thinking about it.

When I entered the room, I saw that Mataro was less perturbed than his sister; he was reluctantly packing his bag kept looking around as if trying to find an opportunity to give her the slip. Then he started looking at me curiously and approached me, his eyes were wide.

"Hey, uh..."

"What?"

"I'm... sorry about earlier. Mom told me that when I was small, my sister saved your life. I didn't know that, and I said some pretty nasty things."

"Your mother told you to say that?"

"Yea... but I mean it too. Plus I heard you took on Lady Satsuki to save my sister. That's true, isn't it?"

His expression was now beseeching, like he wanted me to give him a good story about what happened.

"Yup."

"But... why would she be after you in the first place? You must have really made her mad-"

"That bitch doesn't have the guts to take me on herself, so she sent one of her cronies to do it instead-"

Mataro jumped towards me and covered my mouth with his hand.

"Quiet! Mom will kill you if she hears you say that-"

I bit Mataro's hand; he screamed and immediately released me.

"I already called her that to her face, but for some reason she let me go."

"Wait... you took her on before this? Mom said that you got into a fight with some goons near Honnouji Academy, did you lie to her about that?"

I nodded. Mataro ran to his sister and pulled her to my side, then he ran outside the room, supposedly to call his parents. They came in after a few minutes and crowded around me.

"Mataro says that you took on Lady Satsuki before this... why didn't you tell us earlier?" Mako's mom asked.

"Eh, this explains some things. Lady Satsuki wouldn't attack someone without reason."

I remembered Mr. Mikisugi's instructions to me, why I took up the job in the first place, and what I wanted to do. Then I realized then that Mako getting captured was my fault... I bungled Mr. Mikisugi's plan, and by extension, my own goals in every possible way. The more I hung around with Mako, the more in danger she was.

Why was I concerned about her wellbeing in the first place anyway? Mako was only going to drag me down. She had no fighting skills and was as dumb as a brick.

I had no reason to be here anymore... but I owed them an explanation. They were a part of all this now... so I had to tell them everything. So I this time, I told them the truth, but still left out some details. I told them about Mr. Mikisugi's plan, but I actually told them it was my own. I also mentioned Satsuki interrupting my match with Masaya. Then I told them what actually happened in that match. I mentioned Senketsu as well, but only in passing.

"But Ryuko... I heard that only Mistress Ragyo has one of those special outfits..."

"The tennis girl said the exact same thing. Maybe my dad somehow knew how to make them as well, and that's probably one of the reasons why the Kiryuins were after him..."

Then I started to walk out of the room and turned to Mako before I was about to leave.

"Listen, I can't be staying here for long. Now that you guys know everything and that my debt to you has been repaid, you don't have to take care of me anymore. Thanks for everything. I'll be going now."

Then I ran to the bathroom and got my suitcase, and started to make my way towards the door, but I felt an arm around my shoulder just before I was about to open it.

"You sure you wanna do that...? I mean, with the Kiryuins after you I think that going at it alone isn't a smart option..."

"Barazo's right, Ryuko."

"I'll manage. Don't worry."

Mako looked at me with tears in her eyes.

"Why...? Why do you have to leave?"

"I'm going to keep getting you involved in my mess, and that can't happen. Besides, having one more mouth to feed's probably just going to be a nuisance-"

Mako grabbed me by the collar and started glaring at me.

"YOU ARE NOT A NUSIANCE, RYUKO! You're my friend-"

"No, you're not! And let go of me! I need to go!"

Mako had a determined look on her face; she took a few steps back. Then she lifted her hands in the air for a few seconds, and then pointed at me.

"Ryuko, I get it! You feel guilty! You blame yourself for my getting captured yesterday, but it's not your fault!"

I rolled my eyes, if Mako thought that she was going to convince me to stay by giving me a rousing speech, she had another thing coming.

"It was Lady Satsuki who tried to kill me, not you! You were the one who saved me, remember? So it's all right, trust in me and don't feel guilty anymore! Know that I'll always be your friend, forever and-"

I didn't understand. Why? Why did they want me near them? Didn't they know I was nothing but trouble? Why were they so different from the other humans who either hated my guts or wanted to use me?

It was simple to me, they were idiots.

I didn't want to waste my time with idiots, so I sprinted off without Mako to the tramway, ignoring her calling for me to come back, and I made it a point to sit in a place where she couldn't see me.

I do not understand this at all.

Don't talk to me.

The last thing you want is for me to overburden you, correct? Oh, and you wish I could not read your thoughts, you have expressed this before.

Shut up!

Since you are in no position to block my input, I will say my piece regardless of whether you are willing to listen or not. The exuberant one with you, I do not understand why she would want you around. She technically has no use for you, perhaps she wishes for her own protection-

She's an idiot.

From your insistence, it seems that this is something you are forcing yourself to believe. I do not understand why. Underestimating the flesh-beings could lead to death.

I know that!

I detect a sort of... what do flesh-beings call it? Ah yes, bitterness in you. I detected the same bitterness when I looked into your memory. And I also detect fear... fear is dangerous, Ryuko. You'd do well to dispel it-

I'M NOT SCARED OF ANYTHING!

Now you appear to be in denial. What causes flesh-beings to develop this sentiment?

You won't understand.

Indeed, that is why I am asking you.

Figure it out yourself. You can read my thoughts, right? That's enough for you.

Luckily Senketsu shut up after that. Then I made my way to class, thankfully, on time. When I stepped in, everyone was staring at me in a mix of awe and fear, I guessed that they watched my fight with the tennis girl yesterday.

"Class, this is Ryuko Matoi," Mr. Mikisugi gestured to me, "She'll be studying here from now on."

He gestured to my desk, which was, regrettably, next to Mako's. On top of it was a pile of books in a rather sorry state, like they were printed decades ago or something. I remembered the school I went to in the colony had similar textbooks. There were also notebooks with the textbooks, and I remembered that I had never taken notes in my life.

"As a no-star student, you'll only have access to these materials. If you become a one or two star however, you'll get access to prototype tablets, and three stars will get access to the latest education software."

I remembered hearing in the colony that the rich learned things differently, with fancy tablets, computers, simulations, and lab programs and such. However the poor used study materials which were long obsolete. It was no skin off my back, but if I wanted answers, I'd have to advance in rank, which meant actually studying, joining a club and performing well, AND fending off Satsuki's goons. I didn't know if I'd be able to handle all that, but I had no choice.

"All right class, take out your mathematics books, we're going to continue with solving equations through differentiation."

I remembered the entrance exam I needed to take and the nightmarish math problems that were thrown at me then. These sums were even worse, and I couldn't follow anything. For the first three hours of the day, I had to wade through biology, chemistry, and English. When the half an hour for lunch came, I was fried.

I realized during that time that I didn't have any lunch, so I had to make do with stealing. I noticed that most of the other no-star kids didn't have any lunch either, or they had cheap crap. Asking Mako was out of the question. I decided to leave the classroom and look for some other place to find food, but I guessed that I had taken a wrong turn somehow. I ended up in a cafeteria, and it was full of one-stars.

I saw a random one-star girl at the table nearest to me; she had a sandwich and an apple with her. I stealthily walked up to her, and when I saw her about to take a bite out of her apple, I pushed her, causing her to gasp and drop it. I grabbed the apple and ran from there, ignoring her screaming 'hey you!' and trying to run after me.

I ate the apple as fast as I could and threw the core on the floor of the corridor somewhere. I saw it fall near a pair of white boots. When I looked up, I was facing a three-star. He had a bit of a tan, blonde hair, he was really tall, above six feet, and muscular, and he had a scowl on his face.

"So you're the new girl, eh? You're worse than I thought. First, you attempt to infiltrate the grounds, then you anger Lady Satsuki, and now you're stealing and littering..."

He got out a tablet and began searching for something.

"Strange, your name according to the database is Haruka Midorikawa, but we all know otherwise. Perhaps Inumuta hasn't updated your information... Remember, new girl, I'm only letting you off with a warning because Lady Satsuki has ordered us not to kill you... yet."

Great... he was one of her goons, that just made things even worse.

"Who are you?"

"Ira Gamagoori, head of the Disciplinary Committee and Lady Satsuki's right hand. "

"I thought that Sanageyama dude was her right hand..."

"Lady Satsuki has multiple right hands... and we are all watching you closely. Now, get away from me, new girl, if you cross me, you will pay."

"Hold up, you said Satsuki ordered you and your ilk to keep me alive, why?"

"That is none of your business."

"All right then, if you're not gonna tell me, I guess I'll have to fight you for it!"

I got my scissor blade out of my pocket and let it expand.

Ryuko, stop. This flesh-being is beyond you. He will crush you in seconds-

Shut up! I know what I'm doing!

"I don't know what's worse, your complete and utter disregard for the rules, or your suicidal overconfidence..."

He ran towards me with his fists out, like he was about to punch me, and I was about to transform when I heard footsteps coming towards me.

"Ryuko!"

Both of us turned around, frozen in place, and saw that Mako was there. She looked pretty pissed off. Gamagoori was just staring at Mako with a stunned expression.

"Mankanshoku, stay out of this, she refuses to comply with the rules of this academy."

"Ryuko, what are you doing? Can't you see that stealing and littering is wrong? You're lucky you got off with a warning! Don't worry, Gamagoori, she'll apologize and she won't do it again, right?"

I realized that she was trying to get me out of this situation. I didn't think it would work though.

"Yea... I... I'll lay off."

Even if it was to get out of trouble, I was never going to say sorry. Never said it before, and wasn't going to start.

"I will not pursue you as per Lady Satsuki's orders. However, you'll have a black mark on your record for this. Oh, and Mankanshoku..."

"What?"

"What have you decided?"

She shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

"Oh, I'm not quite sure what you're talking about."

Gamagoori sighed and walked away. Then Mako held out her hands like she was going to make another speech or something.

"Ryuko, what were you thinking? I know that you're trying to get revenge and all that, but you can't go at it alone! You have to understand, I can't watch my friend get hurt like that, and you're-"

"Why did you save me?"

"Because you're my friend, Ryuko! And friends help friends who are in trouble, no matter what! I know what you're thinking, you think that because you're a hybrid, we secretly hate you, but we don't! Trust us!"

Ahhh, now this makes sense.

I thought I told you to shut up.

Your memories have given me at least part of the answer, having spent most of your life alone and on the run, you do not understand the emotions of your own kind. You believe everyone around you to be treacherous. However... in this case you may be wrong.

That kind of thinking has saved me before.

Yes... but it has caused you distress. One cannot carry out an objective with a distressed mind. The exuberant one has saved you because of this concept of 'friendship.' Her stupidity is unmatched... however, a roof over your head and a stable mind will save a lot of trouble.

Staying with her may also give you some insight on how to read the intentions of others correctly. Take up her offer.

"All right, you win. I'll stay."

Mako smiled at me and we started to walk back to class, there was something I wanted to ask her however...

"Hey, Mako? Do you and that Gamagoori guy know each other?"

"No, not really."

The rest of the day was just as exhausting. Plus school days in Honnouji were absurdly long... it was six in the evening. And just when I thought that I was done for the day, Mr. Mikisugi dropped another bomb on my head.

"Matoi, please see me in my office."

I knew what this was really going to be about, but I had to face it. I reluctantly made my way to his office and sat down in one of the chairs. He sat in the couch in front of me, crossed his legs and did that weird hair flip thing. I braced myself for a lecture.

"I was hoping for a stealth operation... but of course, you made that impossible for me. What surprises me the most though is Lady Satsuki's verdict... she's letting you, a potential threat to her regime, run away scot-free."

"I know I bungled up your plans, so we have to change our game. Satsuki can't be keeping me alive out of mercy; she's probably got ulterior motives... wait, what do you mean by 'of course?' "

"I told you to lay low... but I had a strong suspicion that this wouldn't work, given the nature of Kamui. That's why I had a plan B."

"Wait, you know about these things right? Why does everyone think that Ragyo's the only person with a Kamui?"

"Because that's what the Kiryuins want you to believe. There are other Kamui out there, mostly worn by Ragyo's associates... and of course, yours, which your father made for you. If you want to know where he got his trade from, I'm afraid I can't tell you. He refused to answer that whenever I asked him."

He got up and was standing behind me. Then he handed me a red glove with spikes in the fingers and a switch-like piece on the side.

"What's this?"

"The last piece of your Kamui, your father asked me to hold on to it. It's called a syringe glove; it makes it easier for you to provide it with blood."

"So I just turn this thing here to make it work, right?" I gestured to the switch.

"Correct."

Then out of nowhere, he wrapped his arms around my shoulders, I could feel him leaning on me and his breath against my neck. I could feel my face turning red.

"Uhhh..."

"Satsuki's keeping you alive, so this makes everything much easier. You are to quietly assimilate into the academy and gather information... in addition to learning how to master that Kamui. You'll come to me for that. Also, club tryouts start tomorrow, so get into the kendo club to hone your swordplay as well. Give them the impression that you've learned the error of your ways..."

He was whispering in my ear, his voice was soft and strangely enticing. I kind of didn't want him to leave or stop what he was doing.

Your oxytocin levels and body temperature are rising, strange...

I didn't really understand what Senketsu was talking about, but I didn't care to listen to him.

"Do you understand me?"

"...yea." That was all I could manage.

"Good..."

He nipped at the lower part of my ear; I let out a surprised yelp.

Your heartbeat has risen dramatically in response... even more bizarre...

He pulled his hair back and hunched again, then I walked out of the room and took the stairs to the ground floor, apparently only two stars and above could take the lift. I saw Mako waiting for me in the entrance, and we took the tramway home.

"Hey, Ryuko?"

"Yeah?"

"What did Mr. Mikisugi talk to you about? You said he was your dad's friend or something, and that he knew some answers."

I knew I couldn't be one hundred percent truthful.

"He asked me how Dad died, and told me that the Kiryuins were responsible. He said I should be careful, but I told him I wanted revenge and kind of walked out on him. He chewed me out for doing that after class today."

"Ohhh, I see."

We were silent for a while as I looked out the window. We passed by the three-star district with its huge houses and pretty gardens, the two star district with the smaller and less gaudy looking houses, and we started moving into the one star district with its apartment complexes. I thought about how absurd it was, how your marks and talents could affect so much. When I came back to Mako's house, I had to explain how Mako convinced me to stay. Her parents and brother seemed a lot happier afterwards. When I went to the dinner table to eat however, I wasn't sure if I could stay happy.

"Ryuko, what's wrong?"

She was asking me what was wrong... did she think that anyone would be comfortable eating miso soup that looked like it was made with sludge water and croquettes filled with who-knows-what?

"Oh, this? It's nothing fancy, but dig in! You need your strength tomorrow!" Mako's mom cheerfully served me soup and three croquettes along with a bowl of rice. Everyone else was eating like it was the best food ever, but I wasn't too sure.

I decided to take a bite of just the croquettes, and strangely enough... they actually tasted good.

"Wow, these aren't half bad... what did you put in them?"

Mako's mom smiled widely, I found it a little unsettling.

"Oh, that doesn't matter!"

I decided not to think about it and ate what I could. After dinner, Mako, Mataro, and I went to the living room to do our homework. I didn't really know what to do, so I just wrote what I knew. By the time we were done, it was about ten. I was so exhausted that I fell asleep without even changing.

I can't breathe.

My eyes burn, I can't feel my body, I feel like I'm being swallowed by the clear blue abyss.

Water...

The water breaks me down, it makes me weak, it controls me, and it makes me powerless. I'm trapped in its grasp, it beckons me to stop fighting it and give up.

My body grows hot and cold, I feel paralyzed, then suddenly, I come up to the surface, gasping for breath.

I begin to wail and scream for help. I start treading the water in a desperate attempt to stay afloat, I begin to flail about and search for the nearest object I can find to anchor myself. I feel myself beginning to sink again, and then I hear a voice.

"Stay still, my dear, and entrust your heart to me..."

I woke up screaming.

My heart was in my throat, I was panting and drenched in sweat. I suddenly heard rustling and the next thing I knew, Mako was right in front of me. Her eyes were puffy from sleep and her hair was tousled.

"You all right, Ryuko?"

"Drowning... a voice..."

I was still so fear-stricken that I was unable to properly tell her what my nightmare was. I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"It's okay, it was just a dream. You can come over to my cot if you're still scared..."

"Nah, I'm good."

Mako looked at me apprehensively, as if she thought I was lying or something, and then went back to bed, shrugging her shoulders. I tried to fall asleep, but I was lying awake in bed and started tossing and turning. That nightmare was still bothering me.

Ryuko, perhaps there is a connection between your nightmare and what I just experienced.

What do you mean?

How would you flesh-beings explain this...? I felt as if something... or someone has tampered with our link.

I don't get it...

I have a strong suspicion that something is trying to contact us. I doubt it is one of my own kind, the only cross-breeds we can communicate with are our own hosts.

But... what if it is?

Highly improbable... but if that is the case, I take back what I said about fear being dangerous. To survive something capable of that... we must be afraid. Very, very afraid.

Second Skin

My vision is red. I can hardly see, but I can hear and feel.

I hear voices, strangely vibrating and ominous voices.

I feel myself running towards the source, but a hand grasps my throat. I cannot breathe for a second, and then they let me go, and loom over me.

Fists collide with my face, fists as hard as iron. I taste blood. And then claws, claws rip at my clothing and my body, claws as sharp as swords. The pain is unbearable, and the sound of my screams of rage makes it worse.

I feel pain in my chest, searing pain that makes me scream out, and I see blood spattering in all directions, after that, I black out.

...

I woke up, not in my bed, but on the cold, hard floor of my late father's lab. I knew it was only a dream, but I still felt like I had been in a fight and lost. My muscles were sore and my head was throbbing. I looked down, I was wearing the Kamui, but it had reverted to its original form. Perhaps my human body could only tolerate so much, and the nightmare was a manifestation of this.

Then I remembered what the Kamui said to me, that my Life Fibres were dormant... what would it have taken for me to activate them? Should I have changed my course of action in order to do so?

After some thinking, I decided that I should not. There was far too much risk involved. If I managed to accidentally cut my Nexus Thread in the process, I would die, and all would be for naught. I was able to control the Kamui as it is, it took effort, but it was enough.

I had to make myself look presentable and then explain myself to Takaji somehow. Then, once I arrived at the Academy, my actual task would begin.

I couldn't sleep much that night, and was still plagued by that nightmare during the day. Even as I got ready, ate, and boarded the tramway, it was still bothering me. It was so bad that it was hard for me to hold on to the railings and keep myself upright.

"Remember problem 6 in the maths homework last night..."

I didn't even have the energy to pay attention to Mako's blabbering, well, it wasn't really blabbering, it was about school, but nonetheless.

"Hey, you look tired. Was it the nightmare?"

"Yeah..." I managed.

"Maybe you can talk about it now... if you want."

I didn't know where to begin. I obviously couldn't talk about what Senketsu said, but I tried to tell her what I could.

"In my dream, I was drowning, but it felt real. I could actually feel the water flooding my lungs and everything. But something was... off."

"Off? Like what?"

"I was scared as hell in that dream, but in real life, I'm not scared of water at all."

"I think you're overreacting. People have nightmares about lots of things, that doesn't mean they're afraid of them when they're awake. You'll feel better today."

Hey, you there?

I was under the impression that you did not want me to speak without your permission.

Well, I'm giving you permission now. Was Mako right, that the nightmare means nothing?

It is unclear; however, I have come up with a possibility.

What?

Do you recall the other Kamui I mentioned, that I thought I remembered being created with me?

...You think that it's trying to communicate with you.

I do not know, this should not be possible, as we cannot communicate from a long distance, in addition, communication with other Kamui should not give the host visions. I understand my speculation is highly illogical-

...but it's the only explanation you've got at present.

Yes. However, the exuberant one is right about one thing, don't read too much into this. You have a long day ahead and more of your plans to carry out.

Gotcha.

I decided to follow both Senketsu and Mako's advice and hoped that I could clear my head enough to concentrate on class. Our first period that day was Japanese, which wasn't so bad, even though the book was full of kanji that I didn't know. After, things started getting worse. Biology was pretty simple in the colony, we just learned about the human body and some basic environmental stuff. Here, they shoved chemical equations and maths problems down our throats and occasionally squeezed in a little bit of biology. I didn't understand why we had learn it like this, why we had to think of a process as simple as breathing as a lengthy list

of chemical reactions, but I guessed that they were doing it to help us cope with the higher ranks. Chemistry made even less sense than biology, as we were just working out reactions the whole class. The less said about maths, the better. It turned out that in Honnouji, they actually checked your homework and graded it, which meant that I had to actually start working from now on.

History was where things got interesting, and by interesting, I meant totally at odds with what we learned in the colonies. Last class, they were apparently discussing how the Star System was formed in the first place. In the colonies they never went into much detail about it, they just told us how it worked and how it was designed to work against us.

In the early 21st century there was this deadly virus that broke out and people died. At the time, Life Fibre induced clothing was being made, but only for the elite and super-rich. Everyone else didn't know about them. However, in Taiwan, this resistance faction started distributing Life Fibre induced clothing to the common people to protect them from the disease. The government at the time didn't like that, so they tried to stop them but they got overthrown. That revolution inspired the Koreans to revolt against their government as well. At the time Korea was split in two, and the Northern half was ruled by this one family who had everything while everyone else had nothing. Honestly, not much has changed since then.

After their revolution though, the Southern half didn't know what to do with all the new people. So they set it up so that only the healthiest and strongest could cross their border, and those people were given Life Fibre induced clothing. Over time the Northern half became a dumping ground for the poor and sick. As the years passed other countries started imitating them and eventually, it became the whole shtick we knew today.

When lunch came, I wasn't too worried because today I had something to eat. Mako's mom had packed croquettes for the both of us. I finished my food as fast as I could, and afterwards, I heard an announcement on the megaphone. It was Satsuki's voice; just hearing it made my skin crawl.

"Attention Students, club tryouts will take place from today to the 14th. One-Stars and above will receive a circular in their tablets, while No-Stars will receive a printed form from their respective class teachers after school today. I repeat club tryouts will take place from today to the 14th..."

I remembered Mr. Mikisugi mentioning club tryouts. I made a mental note to talk to that Sanageyama dude about joining the kendo club, though I didn't think he'd let me after the last little match I had with one of his members. Then, just when I thought the announcement was over, I heard another noise come from the megaphone...

"Haruka Midorikawa, meet me in the Three-Star stadium after class. Do not take any detours or attempt to escape, if you do, I shall know. I will be waiting."

My blood went cold... maybe Satsuki decided she had enough of keeping me alive, or maybe she was going to interrogate me about Dad's resistance faction, maybe she knew I was in league with Aikurou... the possibilities seemed limitless. All the other students seemed more worried than me though, as they all started looking at me like a lamb about to go to the slaughter.

"What would Lady Satsuki want with you now?" Mako asked.

"...I don't know. But I hope I live to tell the tale."

After lunch was English period, which was hard to follow because I didn't know the language very well. Then came physics, which was so hellish I almost wanted Satsuki to come down here and cut my throat. When the day ended, at six, I didn't know if I would have enough energy to confront Satsuki.

Ryuko, you are nervous and fear-stricken. You must clear your head before you confront your opponent.

I know, but it's hard.

Ryuko... I have been meaning to ask you this for some time. Why do you take such issue with my form?

You mean the fact that you transform into what may as well be a strapless bikini? Of course, I'll take issue with it! I mean, I know why you look like that, but still! Imagine fighting for your life with barely anything on!

You take issue with my form because of the taboos of your species? If I may, that's rather... how do you call it? Ah yes, petty. Such pettiness could lead you into trouble.

It hasn't done that before.

Ponder on this sometime, but now, perhaps you should get ready.

The Three-Star stadium was, quite aptly, on the third floor of the upper campus. Both the upper and junior campuses were sorted by rank. No-Stars were on the ground floor, One-Stars were on the first, and so on. I had to take the stairs, because only Two Stars and above could take the lift.

The Three-Star's floor looked nothing like ours. The floors and walls were of silver tiles instead of wood, there were sensors in the doors that made them open when you got close by, they all wore custom uniforms, the rooms were much bigger despite having fewer people, and they had actual lab classrooms. Nobody was carrying bags, or books, or even writing materials. Everyone had everything they needed in a small tablet.

When they saw me, they probably recognized me from the announcement, and they started inching away from me like I was made of poison or something. Maybe they thought they didn't want to get near me because of my low status, or they thought I was dirty. Whatever it was, I didn't care.

The stadium was probably used for sporting events or tournaments. It was guarded by curve-shaped double doors. When I stepped in front of them, they opened to reveal a huge electronic board, a vast multi-purpose playing court, and bleachers. Everything looked so bright and clean, even more so than the testing room's court. In the centre of the room, she

was standing there. She began to walk closer to me, and then she held her sword out to the side. Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain in my head.

You...!

Wait... that wasn't Senketsu, who was that?

"Do you know why I have called you here, Matoi?"

I held out my scissor blade, it was pointing at her face. She didn't move an inch.

"Enough with your guessing games, tell me right now. What the hell do you want with me? And are you going to spill the beans about who killed my dad or not?"

Faster than I could anticipate it, she kicked me in the shin. I screamed and fell over.

"Oh please don't bombard me with questions like that, it makes me irritable. I told you time and time again, or are you as forgetful as you are dim-witted? You will have to fight for what you seek."

Ryuko, she is provoking you. Hold your ground.

I got up, using my scissor blade as a crutch.

"So you called me over to kick my ass?"

She scoffed at me and pointed her sword at my chin.

"In crass terms, yes, but before I beat you senseless, take a good look at me. Do you notice anything different?"

There was something different, what she was wearing. She had a blue glove on her right hand, long white boots that hit her knees and a long-sleeved white sailor dress. The shoulder pads and collar were bright blue, with yellow and red designs on the chest that resembled eyes.

Wait... a collar that resembled eyes?!

"What the-"

"How Ishin Matoi managed to get a hold of our secrets is beyond me, but no matter..."

She turned the switch on her syringe glove, and I did the same. When transformed, her Kamui looked exactly like mine except it was white and blue. She came charging at me, I managed to block her sword, but I was struggling to protect myself.

"But- but you're human! This isn't possible!"

Satsuki pushed me down and stepped on my fingers, the pain was so terrible that I wouldn't be surprised if she broke my hand.

"Human I may be, but unlike you, I've mastered how to wear the Kamui. You've barely scratched the surface, pig in human clothing."

She stopped crushing my hand and pointed her sword at me.

"Now stop lying there, and fight me."

I ran towards her and tried to hit her in her legs, I knew she was pretty strong, but not that fast. She dodged me effortlessly and tried to hit me on the shoulder, but I dodged her. Once, twice, and again, she tried to stab my arms, and I blocked her for two times, and the third, she grazed my right shoulder. It hurt, but not very much. It was pathetic that she managed to wound me but I couldn't even scratch her.

Help me locate her Nexus Thread already!

I felt myself grow pale when Senketsu helped me to do just that, the top half of Satsuki's Kamui was covered almost entirely in Nexus Threads.

Kamui tend to have more than one. And they all have to be cut in a certain order otherwise nothing will happen.

So you're saying that...

... at your current state, trying to cut her Kamui will be futile.

Then I felt the searing pain in my head again, and all of a sudden I crouched a bit.

Ah, my other half! It has been too long!

There was that voice again. It wasn't Senketsu... Senketsu wasn't this high pitched.

Ryuko! Watch out!

Satsuki was aiming for my feet; luckily I swerved out of the way.

Was that the-

I was right, this is the one. She called me her other half.

'Other half?' what's that supposed to mean? And how the hell can I hear her? Didn't you say that Kamui can only communicate with their hosts?

I did, but circumstances are becoming so illogical that I have no idea what to believe...

I guessed that I had lost my guard in those seconds because Satsuki had thrown her sword to the side and started punching me just like the boxer dude did. Her punches were surprisingly nowhere near as fast or hard, but she had me covered in bruises all the same, and when I looked down, Senketsu had reverted back to normal.

"You're pathetic."

I could feel the blood draining from my body, and I was so close to passing out.

"...says the one fighting in a strapless bikini..."

She frowned at me and began to circle me.

"You mean you actually concern yourself with the form your Kamui takes? This is your problem. You let everything else get in the way of your goals, but not me. My intentions..."

She grabbed me by the neck and threw me across the stadium. I heard a thud noise when I landed, I could taste blood.

"...are completely and utterly pure."

Suddenly I had an epiphany... Satsuki wasn't passing out, and Satsuki didn't give a damn about how stupid the Kamui looked...

With what little strength I had, I turned the switch on the syringe glove again, and suddenly I was as good as new and could move again. And this time, I didn't feel nervous, or embarrassed, or conscious about how I looked while fighting, and I couldn't feel Senketsu digging into my flesh anymore.

You were right.

Right about what?

The only way to truly master you is to accept you completely, to welcome you as I would my second skin...!

I ran towards Satsuki and started to attack her, aiming at whatever body part she left open. She was able to block me until I managed to hit her in the stomach. The pain and blood didn't bother her, but it did bother the Kamui I guessed, because it reverted to its original form and there was a red patch where she was bleeding.

"Looks like you're all bark and no bite, eh?"

She grabbed my throat and held me in the air. The look in her eyes was different from before. She was very bland and cool throughout the whole fight, but then, I saw rage. Seething, frothing at the mouth, near uncontrollable rage. She was so angry that her hand was shaking.

"You think you've won, don't you? You think that you can stroll in here and take the throne from me, don't you? You might have figured out how to operate the Kamui, you might become stronger from here... but you will NEVER surpass me, EVER."

She wasn't yelling or screaming, but there was still quite a bit of anger in her tone. Then she freed her grip and let me fall to the floor. I started coughing.

"I don't want your stupid throne, I want answers."

She walked to the door, her other hand clutching her stomach. Then she turned to look at me.

"...If you think I'm showing you mercy, you're wrong."

The Mouse Trap

"They did not die in vain. They died for the sake of progress and the betterment of humankind."

Those are the words plastered on that huge white wall, and names of those who passed away while working to better the country. I don't know if I should believe them, but I know the consequences if I don't.

Akko and Misaki stare at me, wide eyed and confused. I give them a solemn look, I don't need to tell them anything. They're old enough to understand what our mom's name on that wall means. None of us expected it. We were told she was offered a high profile job at REVOCS, something that a person from one of the Big Seven families always strives for. We were so happy when we got the news... and then one day, she never came back from work. They told us it was a lab accident.

We still have Dad, but it's not really the same anymore. Misaki can't bring herself to focus on preparing for her evaluation because she's too upset. I keep telling her that if she's like this, the world's going to eat her alive, but she doesn't understand.

"Why did Mom die?"

I don't know what to tell Akko, how to make this much easier for a six-year-old to digest.

"You see that building over there?" I gesture to the Kiryuin manor, which is just a few blocks away from where we are, the Eulogy Wall.

"Mom used to work there, but Mom's job was dangerous. Bad things happened there... and Mom didn't make it. Don't worry though, Dad's here, and I'm here. We'll help to take care of you guys-"

When I turn to my left I see that Akko is not there. Misaki and I begin to look around for any sign of her, and then we see a small figure throwing pebbles at the gates of the Kiryuin Manor.

Words cannot describe just how scared I am. We both run to her so that we can prevent her from getting in trouble but it's too late. Two guards have already come out and are about to take her for questioning, but I grab her as fast as I can, with Misaki running after. We run for our lives to get the guards off our tail and find an alleyway. There's a dark and narrow crevice near the left-hand corner and on one of its walls, a ladder. To my right, I see a rope, some garbage cans, and a street light...

The guards are looking in the alley below us, and when one of them takes a step right under the street light, I drop one garbage can to the ground and Misaki drops another; and both their legs are snagged. They scream out curses as they hang from the street light, dangling from one leg.

I sigh in relief, while at the same time patting myself on the back for a job well done, and the three of us begin to look around for a way down, but someone is standing there with us. She has to be at most fourteen, but she's dressed like an adult. She has long black hair; blue eyes, and eyebrows that pretty much take up her whole face. Her blazer, her pants, her boots, they're all pristine white.

Dad told me before we came to this city that you could tell if someone belonged to a Big Seven Family from the colours they wore, or what colour hair dye they used. For us, it's purple. For the Inumuta family, it's blue. There is only one family however that wears white... and their heiress is standing right in front of me and my sisters.

I start getting desperate. I get on my knees and start begging and crying. I tell her I did it out of self-defence, that I was only trying to protect my family... but surprisingly, she isn't angry.

"That trap, did you set it yourself?"

I nod timidly.

"How disgraceful ..." she murmurs as she looks at those hapless guards, "... if these buffoons can't outwit a little girl, how can they even hope to protect my mother?"

She scoffs in their direction and then turns back to us. She begins eyeing my hair, which is dyed a deep violet.

"You're from a prominent family... aren't you?"

"Y-yes."

"Tell me your name, girl."

...

"Maiko Ogure of Senior Division Class 1C reporting for duty."

I was in the council room, with the monitors on the left and right side walls, and in front of me, the windows and Lady Satsuki sitting in her chair. She looked up from her cup of tea for a moment.

"How are the preparations for No-Late Day coming along?"

Every July, in every city school, there would come a day where the One-Star and No-Star students would be put to the test, to see if they were fit to withstand the climb to greatness. It was a race against the clock where one had to battle against hurdles that required a strong body and mind. The Junior Division already had theirs, now it was the Senior Division's turn.

"Smoothly, my lady, as Head of Event Coordination it is my duty to see to it that all is according to plan."

"Junior Division has performed... poorly this year. Almost half of their first years didn't make it."

"They were not worthy to study in Honnouji, my lady. I believe natural selection was at work."

Lady Satsuki was quiet for a minute or two, and then she took another sip of her tea.

"Tell those under your command to up the ante. Double the number of traps and the number of checkpoints, oh, and keep a new rule in place..."

"What, my lady?"

"The use of any uniform above One-Star during the course of No Late Day will result in expulsion."

"Ryuko? What are you doing? The question says to integrate, not to differentiate!"

I looked down at my homework notebook and realized my mistake once Mako pointed it out. Great, now I had to erase my work and start from square one.

"Oh, great, NOW you tell me!"

I began to erase my work furiously and look through the sum again. My head was aching from the amount of work I was doing. I had been at this damn school for one and a half months and in that time I'd gotten more homework than I've ever had in my ten years of school.

"It's okay. I get them confused all the time."

I began to glare at the sum angrily, as though it was Satsuki, and decided that compared to holding your own against her, a few maths sums would be nothing.

"You just gotta read the question carefully, and then think about what is it you need to find and how to get there before writing anything down."

"Since when did you get so clever?"

I didn't know if I had hit a nerve or not, but Mako sounded less enthusiastic after I said it.

"I know the concepts and stuff; I'm just not very good at tests... but at Honnouji the tests are all they look at. If you pass, you're great, and if you don't, you're useless. But you know, a lot of the people who pass their evaluation and become One-Stars and Two-Stars are actually not that smart. It's the Three-Stars that are clever both on paper and when you talk to them."

I heard the sliding door open and saw Mako's mom holding a tray with croquettes and glasses of water.

"Studying hard, you two?" she asked as she placed the food near us.

"I honestly don't know how you managed because the Honnouji school system is tough," I grumbled as I tried to solve another problem.

"I'm sure it must be quite hard. I found the system difficult myself, which is why I never passed my evaluation."

I felt the blood drain from my face and realized that I shouldn't have opened my big fat mouth.

"Oh. I didn't mean to-"

"No, no. It's fine. I get this a lot. Now even though the school says otherwise, don't work yourselves too much. Getting good rest is important too. Especially since your No-Late Day is coming up soon..." she walked back to the sliding door and exited the room.

I almost forgot about No-Late Day. When Junior Division had theirs last week, we had a day off. Mr. Mikisugi chose that opportunity to double the homework given to us. In the days leading up to it, I saw some of those poor kids crying, some of them even had to be dragged to school screaming. The results were also posted on the notice board in the No-Star floor, and almost half the ten-year-olds were booted out. I also remembered that if Mataro played his cards right for the next two years, he'd go to Honnouji Academy, and have to go through that horrible ordeal.

"Mako... why do people fear No-Late Day so much?"

"Because it exists to get rid of those the system deems useless. You know that empty dirt path we pass by on the way to school? That was designed specifically for the occasion. They'll make it into an obstacle course and put in all sorts of checkpoints where we have to answer questions, questions tougher than the homework we have now. You have three chances to make a mistake. If you use up all your chances, or if you don't make it to the school before the four-hour time limit, you're expelled. It's a gruelling challenge, and a lot of people fail."

"How did you make it?"

"To be honest, I'm not really sure. But I guess I just... did. They say if you pass it as a ten-year-old, it's easier when you're eleven, and so on and so forth. So I guess it's just not hard for me anymore. Plus, in other places, No-Late Day can be lethal. But here, nobody dies from any of the traps."

To be honest, however, I wasn't too worried. I was a hybrid and I had a Kamui with me, so perhaps the challenge would be lessened. I decided to cross the bridge when I got to it; after all, we still had two days left.

...

"...On account of No-Late Day being tomorrow, you won't have any homework or clubs today. On my desk, you'll see some prototype tablets to be used to solve the questions tomorrow."

Mr. Mikisugi began handing the tablets out to us. They were grey plastic devices about the size of half my forearm and they came with a satchel to carry them around. When I pressed

the button at the bottom of the screen, there was a sort of touchpad keyboard at the bottom and a menu with icons for features I didn't really understand.

Suddenly I heard a ping sound and a message came up on my screen. Mr. Mikisugi was asking me to see him after class. That was odd; we only saw each other twice before this. The first time he called me to him was after Satsuki picked up a fight with me. I remembered asking him about why her Kamui could communicate with me and why she called Senketsu her other half. He said he didn't know, but he did tell me to avoid fighting until the time came. The second was just before I was going to try out for the kendo club. He gave me some tips about the following the rules and stuff, and surprisingly they worked. Uzu let me in and I thought I was doing pretty okay.

"Get yourselves acquainted with them, One-Stars know how to operate them very well, and you don't want to be at a disadvantage because you have trouble typing. There's also a sample question bank in there. Be sure to do it. Well, in any case, good luck to all of you, class dismissed."

Everyone grabbed their tablets and bags and began making their way home. Mako asked me if I was going to with her, but I told her to go ahead. When I made my way to the staff room, I saw Mr. Mikisugi sitting in a chair with his hair flipped back.

"Ah, Matoi, so you got my message..." he was smirking; his voice was low and silky, "Although, you ought to be more careful in the future. You had such passion in your eyes today, and it would be pretty bad if people found out about our relationship..."

Ryuko...

His emphasis on the word 'relationship' made me angry but also made my heart jump to my throat.

"The only relationship here is the one my fist has with your face!" I made like I was going to punch him, but he dodged my fist. Suddenly, I felt his presence behind me. His hands were on my hips.

Ryuko...

"...You really need to work on your sense of humour."

I wanted to be pissed off, but I couldn't find it in me. I leaned into him slightly and pulled my head back, he brought me closer to him and his grip tightened. I began to feel suffocated and the air around me was suddenly boiling hot.

You're feverish again, is that why you won't pay heed to me?

"Lady Satsuki's made a new rule, you can't use any uniform above One-Star tomorrow or you'll be expelled." He moved one of his hands to stroke my hair.

"...So, so I can't use Senketsu tomorrow then?"

Ryuko, please listen-

"Unfortunately, no, but, I have a solution. I've left a One-Star uniform near the door. You can use that. It's not what you're used to, but it's something."

"Th-thanks."

"Oh, believe me, it's my pleasure..."

The hand that was on my hip moved to the side of my leg, he gave it a little squeeze. I scrunched up my face and bit my lip to muffle a whimper.

"Oh dear, it seems I've kept you for too long... you need to prepare and build up your strength tomorrow. You'll need it."

I nodded, and he let go of me, then turned to face me, one of his hands was holding my cheek.

"Good luck."

He kissed me near my jaw, which caused me to turn even redder than I already was. I picked up the One Star Uniform, put it in my bag, and walked out of the staff room quickly.

Ryuko, are you willing to hear me now?

Wait... you were trying to talk to me?

Yes, for about five times. I was trying to give you a word of advice.

Advice?

I boarded the tramway and held on to the rail, continuing to converse with Senketsu.

You need to become stronger if you want that man to see you as an equal.

Wait... Mr. Mikisugi? Why do you say that?

He puts his hands on you constantly.

Uhh...Senketsu? If he was trying to show he was stronger than me... do you really think he'd be touching me and kissing me every chance he got?

You seem very nonchalant about it. In general, your response to his actions is rather worrying. Your voice becomes timid; you have trouble responding to your surroundings, you have palpitations, your heartbeat and oxytocin levels rise, and you develop fever.

Are you implying that I've got a crush on him?

I do not follow – wait, why are you imagining him and you in a bedroom-

STOP THAT!

This is worrying. I never took you as someone who was content remaining where you were but-

Wait a minute... Life Fibres don't have the concept of love, or sex, or infatuation... do they?

Are you saying that to flesh-beings, physical intimacy is a sign of emotional closeness? That's quite at odds with what we believe. To us, it is a means of showing dominance over those we deem inferior.

Now I understood why Senketsu assumed what he did, and I felt sick when I realized the implications of what he just said.

You mean... when you touch someone or have sex with someone, you're trying to show them who's boss?

That's another way to say it.

That's... that's horrible...

I have offended your sensibilities; perhaps this practice is abhorrent to your kind. I apologize for making you distraught, given your ordeal tomorrow. You need to be ready for it.

I felt the tramway come to a halt, and I began to walk back to Mako's house, and then I became nervous again. The whole evening was a blur, and I didn't know if I could sleep, but I had to if I wanted to survive tomorrow.

...

We woke up at 4 AM; I'd never woken up that early in my life.

I made sure not to wear Senketsu today and changed into the One-Star Uniform instead. It was an indigo dress that came up to my knees, with a bow near the collar. On the front was a black star. I felt weird in it, but I knew the feeling would pass. I knew however that the rules said nothing about carrying weapons, so I put my scissor blade in my pocket. We got out some leftover croquettes from the fridge and ate quickly, and then we got our tablets. Then we took the long walk, Mako lead the way.

One and No-Star students were crowded together like a herd of sheep, all of them were nervous in some way, I guessed. Many of them looked sleep deprived and some of them were even angry. The dirt path was completely transformed. I couldn't see all the obstacles they put for us, but I could see the first one, a plain old flight of stairs that was most probably booby-trapped. There was also a huge electronic board in front of us, and then that Gamagoori guy's face appeared on it.

"Listen up, students of Honnouji Academy! Anyone who fails to arrive at this spot at or before 4:30 AM will be expelled! Anyone wearing a uniform above One-Star will be expelled! Anyone who uses up their chances during the event or fails to reach Honnouji Academy before 8:30 AM will be expelled! Anyone attempting to use the tramway in the

case of No-Stars or the school bus service in the case of One-Stars will be expelled! All of you will comply with these rules!"

Everyone started getting ready to dash off, myself included, and then a counter appeared on the screen, counting backwards from ten. Each and every beeping sound that was made when a second passed felt like it lasted for aeons.

"Should you survive the path ahead of you, you will be deemed worthy to represent our academy until next year! And..."

3...

"Now..."

2...

"Students..."

1...

"Commute!"

I grabbed Mako's hand and we began to push through the crowd before us while running for our lives.

The Rat Race

Ever since I came to this city I often heard Satsuki's goons and people from higher tiers say that life was a race, and if you didn't run fast enough, or push enough people out of the way, you'd get trampled. I didn't really understand what they meant by that until today.

To climb that flight of stairs, Mako and I had to weave through scores of other students. I even had to use my scissor blade to knock a couple people down. Plus, I was right on the money about it being booby trapped, once I was halfway through climbing it, the staircase turned into a ramp. If I didn't bring my scissor blade with me, I wouldn't have made it past the first trap. It was not surprising that Satsuki didn't want me using Senketsu during the event.

"Mako, how many traps are usually there?" I asked as we ran to the next checkpoint.

"Usually there are about fifteen obstacles and fifteen questions." Mako panted as she tried to catch up with me. To her credit, she was pretty fast, in fact, if she was wearing a One-Star uniform, she'd beat me.

I ended up stopping dead in my tracks when I saw a screen right in front of me, and a bunch of people typing furiously on their tablets. My heart sank when I saw the contents on the screen.

"Two flasks with identical medium containing nutrients and glucose are inoculated with yeast cells that are capable of both anaerobic and aerobic respiration. Culture 1 is then sealed to prevent fresh air from reaching it; culture 2 is loosely capped to allow air to reach it. Both flasks are periodically shaken. Which culture will contain the most yeast cells after one week, and why?"

I turned to Mako, who was lost in thought, alternating between staring at the question and her tablet.

"I remember this... I got this... let's see... the second one allows air to pass through... so..." she grumbled in a frustrated tone.

I tried to recall all those biology lectures, reactions, and terms we learned over the course of one month, as I started to think, I felt a strange sensation, as if worms were crawling about in my brain. I knew it was my internal Life Fibres getting to work, strengthening my memory power to help me answer the question.

"Culture 2, because culture 1 doesn't have oxygen, so it goes through anaerobic respiration, which produces less ATP, and therefore, less yeast." I typed with a flourish, and then pressed the "send" button next to the text box.

Mako and I began to wait with bated breath, and then we heard a ping sound, we looked down, and received a message that we had answered correctly and that we could pass through. I heaved a sigh of relief.

"Come on! It's already 5:00!" Mako pulled my hand and we started running again.

The next trap was a narrow path with a bunch of punching bags swinging from all directions, designed to knock you out if you weren't fast enough. We managed to make it past that one. Then we got a maths sum, which I thankfully solved correctly. After that, we came across a track with hurdles placed between the start and finish line. That was relatively easy to get past. I was wondering for a moment if Mako was exaggerating about how tough this could be, and then I was faced with the next question.

"Why is the concept of income or demand elasticity important for a producer of agricultural products?"

I was beyond pissed; economics was a course for One-Star students. I should have known that the questions would be biased in their favour. I told myself to calm down however, I had three chances. If I could do well on all the other questions I might have a chance. I looked at Mako however, who was busily typing away. I was sure she was trying to write some crap hoping she would be correct.

"Hey, you..."

I began to look for the source of the sound, and saw a girl standing right next to me. How she got there, I didn't know. Her wavy, boyish-short hair was black, and she wore thick rimmed glasses. She was wearing a band on her head, like the ones I've seen students wear while studying, and the One-Star uniform, but it was purple instead of blue. I chalked it up to a laundry mistake.

"...demand expands less than proportionately as real incomes grow, so demand tends to be income inelastic, so agricultural producer's demand curves will shift to the right..."

I raised an eyebrow at her babbling. She made a "tsk" sound with her tongue and shook her head.

"I'm giving you the answer."

I wasn't sure if I should trust her or not but I wrote exactly what she said... and she turned out to be right. Mako got the right answer as well. I started to sprint off but then that girl grabbed my arm.

"The traps and questions are only going to get tougher from here. Most of the people here have been doing this since they were ten, you and your friend will not survive alone. If you want to get past this you're going to have to let me go with you."

I backed away and held out my scissor blade at her, eyeing her suspiciously.

"Why? What's in it for you?"

The girl just stared at my scissor blade, frowning.

"I'm not physically strong; you're far from an intellectual. In exchange for my giving you the answers to the questions, you'll have to help me get past all these traps, deal?"

I turned to Mako, hoping that she'd give her opinion on all this.

"Hey, you look familiar, are you one of our classmates?"

The girl's eyes went slightly wide as she stared at Mako for a few seconds, as if they probably did meet before.

"What class are you from?"

"Ryuko and I are in class 3-K."

"Then you must be mistaken; I'm in class 1-G."

I grimaced when I realized that she was two years younger than us and much smarter.

"What's your name? My name's Mako."

The girl was silent for a bit.

"Maiko, just Maiko. Now come on, we've spent too much time dawdling. Hurry."

Maiko joined us and we began to press on. After running for about ten minutes we came across a portion of the lane covered by a roof and haphazardly lined with street lights, garbage can lids were tied on to it so that the light was covered. I didn't know what kind of a trap this was supposed to be, but I was wary nonetheless.

Mako was about to run but I held out my hand, she understood, and we began to walk slowly and on tip toes, keeping our eyes and ears open for anything suspicious. We stopped when we saw a no-star boy run past us, when he was right under one of the street lights, an alarm went off, and a heavy bag tied with a rope fell from the roof, and the boy's leg was caught in a rope I didn't see earlier. Now he was dangling from up high.

Maiko was staring at the path, lost in thought. She furrowed her eyebrows and placed a hand on her chin.

"It appears that they painted the ropes so that they blend in with the dirt path, and of course, not all of the lights are rigged."

"It's simple," I interjected, "We find the path where we have to run into the least amount of lights." I began to survey the area, and as I did, I could feel my internal Life Fibres helping me to do a more thorough job.

"I got it! Just follow me!"

I ran to the right end of the path, Maiko and Mako following suit. I stopped when I came to a street light, and then turned left, then kept moving in a zig-zag motion until there were no lights in sight. Once we were sure that was the end of it, we were about to move on, but Maiko stopped us.

"Wait, take a look at this."

She pointed to a sign board at the end of the checkpoint which said this was trap 4 out of 60. That was strange, Mako said there were only fifteen questions and fifteen traps.

"What, 60?! That's more than usual!"

I felt as if an iron ball had dropped into my stomach. Thirty obstacles were bad enough.

"Satsuki probably thought we needed more of a challenge..." I grumbled.

"We're wasting time. Now come on, the next question is most probably going to be an English one."

"How do you know this?" I asked.

"Because I've done this before."

We were on the move again, but I was starting to wonder. For someone who supposedly needed our help, she could get by pretty well on her own. I was starting to seriously question whether or not she had some kind of ulterior motive. I became even more suspicious when we came to the next checkpoint, as she was right. On the board was a paragraph in English along with three questions. I had to let Maiko help us with this one.

A steep incline with rolling barrels designed to knock you out, a geography question, a slippery surface you need to skate on, an economics question, a series of climbing walls, a chemistry question... as we went on, I began to notice that there was always some sort of pattern. We always started with a biology question and ended with physics. Every question we got was already there in either those prototype tablets or our textbooks. Every single trap seemed to test the same things; endurance, speed, and quick thinking. I remembered that Mako said many of the people who pass this test and graduate in tiers aren't actually that intelligent... it made sense. If you could find a pattern in the system, you could get by.

By the time we got to the 58th trap or so, it was ten minutes to eight. And it was then when Maiko gestured to a part of the dirt road that began to branch out.

"It's a shortcut, come on."

Mako began to look in the direction of the detour, and then to the normal way. She began to furrow her brows and frown, shifting uneasily.

"I don't know you guys... I'll just go the normal way."

I wasn't sure who to trust, should I listen to Maiko, who helped us get through 58 obstacles without incident, or Mako? Then I remembered that you'd get expelled for getting to the academy late, and who knew how difficult the last two obstacles would be.

"...I'll see you in class."

I accompanied Maiko, the detour path was long and winding, and there didn't seem to be anything there until I saw an area with leafless trees and an assortment of metal scraps,

perhaps pieces from past obstacles. I ran to it and began to look for a way out, and found nothing.

I didn't have time to beat myself up over the stupidity of my own actions. I stuffed my right hand in one of the uniform's pockets and closet it over the scissor blade inside, then turned to face her. She had this smug smile on her face, like everything was going according to plan.

"I thought you knew better than to extend a helping hand to others... it seems that Mankanshoku is a bad influence on you..."

Maiko swiped her finger across the band on her forehead and she began to shimmer, when it died down, her appearance changed. Her hair was a dark purple and she was now wearing black leggings, a purple low cut tunic with an indigo sash around the waistband, and underneath, a tight long sleeved black shirt. On the sash, there were three white stars. From the sash of her tunic, which was actually a belt, she got out a small, light throwing knife and threw it at my face; I luckily managed to dodge it. I ran towards her with my scissor blade, pointing it in her direction.

"I knew it! I knew something was fishy about you! You're in league with Satsuki, aren't you?!"

I tried to strike her, but she swiped a finger on her headband again and vanished. Seconds later, I felt a presence behind me. I rolled forward to dodge a second throwing knife.

"Wow, it took you this long to figure it out? How do you think I know the ins and outs of these traps? I designed them, and set all the questions as well."

She disappeared again, I began to survey the area, looking for any signs of movement, and I saw a giant gear rolling towards me. I got out of the way, but it grazed my left arm, which was now bloody.

"Who are you really?!"

Before I could act, I felt rusty chains snaring my leg, she pulled on them and I fell face first into the ground. I spit out dirt and began to prop myself up.

"My name is Maiko Ogure, and I'm the head of Event Coordination."

I felt her pulling the chains again, and I was being dragged across the dirt. I was being hit by rocks and logs until I found myself dangling in mid-air from an unknown height. I tried to search for Maiko, but she was nowhere to be seen.

If I had Senketsu right now, he'd help me to see the Nexus Threads of her uniform and I'd be able to slice her in two.

"Stop playing hide-and-seek and get me down from here! What? Are you too scared to show yourself and fight me one on one?!"

I heard chuckling to my left.

"You call it cowardice..."

A throwing knife made its way into my leg, I cried out from the pain.

"... I call it pragmatism."

I winced as the scent of blood made its way into my nostrils.

"Don't underestimate me! I got two high tier students demoted AND gave Satsuki a good fight!"

Maiko began to chuckle again.

"I'm a cut above those fools you dealt with, Matoi. And as for Lady Satsuki... she was most likely showing you but a fraction of her strength. I've been designing contraptions since I was eight years old, and managed to perfect my craft thanks to Lady Satsuki. If you think you'll be able to evade me, you are gravely mistaken."

She cut the chains down and I fell to the floor again. My head was woozy and I felt like I was seeing double. Then from my peripheral vision I saw two throwing knives aimed at my neck and torso, I was too weak to even dodge them.

"When you don't have the Kamui with you, you're a joke."

I was being impaled with knives, one after the other, and Maiko was moving so fast. After an unknown period of time, I found that she had stabbed me everywhere except my navel. I knew my internal Life Fibres were the only reason why I was alive even after taking a wound to the heart. I could barely feel my body, or see, or smell, or even hear. However, I was still present enough to hear a faint pinging sound, like the ones our tablets make when we get a notification.

"Darn it... I'm out of time. How am I going to explain this...?"

Whatever she said after that was barely intelligible to me, and after a minute or two I couldn't hear her voice again. I had guessed that she left. Then I felt it, a sensation as if worms were moving about inside my body, and then burning pain, as if my skin was being sewed back together. When I looked down, the wounds in my heart and legs were healed, but my arms were still bloody, and all the throwing knives were scattered across the floor. I glanced at my watch, and it was now 8:15.

I didn't understand, what was it with Satsuki and letting me go? And if Maiko didn't want to get me expelled or kill me... what was she after?

I knew thinking about it would eat into my time. I hadn't answered any questions wrong so far, and my wounds would get better as time went by. So I decided to guess the answers for the last question and get past the next trap to the best of my ability. I hoped Mako was waiting for me on the other side.

"Forgive me, my lady. I was unable to locate Matoi's Nexus Threads."

Lady Satsuki stared at me blankly as she held a cup of tea in her hand. Behind her, Houka was searching through surveillance camera footage.

"Did you get a chance to observe her fighting style? Was she focused on blocking any particular part of her body?"

"Yes to the former and no to the latter, my lady."

She placed her tea cup on the glass table in front of her and began to pace the floor, looking somewhat uneasy.

"Then she most likely doesn't know where they are. In fact, it would be safe to say that she has no idea that Hybrids even have Nexus Threads. After all, Ishin abandoned her with little to no information."

She turned to face the monitor in front of us, which showed the footage of my fight with Ryuko, and she began to murmur something.

"My lady," Houka walked up to her, "What exactly... is the purpose of this? Wouldn't it be easier to just-"

"I told you. You can't kill her, Hybrids can't be killed with normal weapons. The only things that can kill her are this," she gestured to Bakuzan, "and the rending scissors. And even then, the only sure fire way to do it is to cut her Nexus Thread."

"If that's the case, then Hybrids are no different from the uniforms they wear."

"Correct."

At that moment, a three star student burst in with a tablet.

"My lady, the results for Senior Division have arrived."

He was about to hand the tablet to her, but he tripped over his shoes, dropping the tablet and grabbing Lady Satsuki's arm by mistake. I sighed, knowing what would happen next.

Her fists clenched, her eyes wide with fury, and she kneed him in the groin and punched his face. He was sprawled on the floor, his eyes black and his nose bloody. She walked up to him, and drew her sword. Her teeth were clenched and her hands were shaking.

"Don't. Touch. Me."

Fortified

"She will find you! I'll give it to you in writing - no matter how much you run, no matter where you hide, she will find you! Why can't you understand that I'm trying to save your own life?!"

The voice is intimidating, but there is a tremor in it that I cannot place. I feel myself being thrown into the dirt. A figure looms over me, then walks away. I begin running towards it at breakneck speed. I scream at the top of my lungs.

"Where are you going?"

It starts running away, faster. I don't even know what's going on. All I know is that wherever I'm being left at is hell, and I would do anything to get back home. I cry out a name, begging, pleading.

"Come back!"

The figure moves farther and farther away, their back turned. No matter how fast I run, I can't even keep up. The sky around me is getting darker and cloudier. The ground beneath my feet turns red. My legs begin to burn. I can feel blood trickling down from my head.

"Come back! Don't leave me!"

It stops momentarily, but I notice I cannot move. My legs are firmly rooted to wherever I'm standing. Eyes, black as coal, stare into mine.

"One day, when you're older, you'll understand..."

Around me, more, smaller figures converge. Their eyes are cold. I feel hands around my throat. The taller figure watches, unflinching, as I am strangled. I'm thrown to the dirt again, and I feel a punch to the right side of my face, and my left. I cry out in anguish as I am kicked in my ribs, my shin, as I am dragged by the hair and my face is smashed into the dirt.

Yet no matter how much I fight against them, nobody comes to my aid. I'm helpless, abandoned... alone.

"Take care."

"Father..."

I woke, looking up at the pristine white walls of my bedroom. I realized that I held my hand out and I was crying. I looked around my room and felt the inexplicable urge to call for someone, anyone...

"Soroi..."

My voice was broken up, I felt a lump in my throat, and tears began to flow once more. Why was I suddenly feeling this way? Why did I feel so alone?

"Shiro..."

I buried my face in my pillow, clinging to the comforter. I looked at my bedside table and saw the conch shell. I didn't know why I couldn't bring myself to throw it away, why I wasted my time with such useless sentiments.

"Kaneo..."

Perhaps remembering that day six years ago made me unable to take it anymore. I curled up into a little ball like a weak and helpless child and began to weep pathetically.

"Fuyuki, H-Haruka..."

And then realization washed over me. If I was allowing a nightmare to interfere with my progress, I wasn't done yet. I couldn't allow myself to regress, to return to being the guileless and wide-eyed little girl that I was.

I couldn't mourn Fuyuki, I had to stop even referring to him by name. If anything, I should have been relieved at his lack of existence. There was, however, another, far worse threat to my position, one that had to be eliminated as soon as I found out how to.

I wiped the tears from my eyes, and then looked around suspiciously, worried that someone would see me like this, and got out of bed. I went to my dressing table and looked in the mirror, realizing that I was still wearing the Kamui. I cursed under my breath. Every time I trained while wearing it, it would eat at my strength bit by bit, until I would eventually collapse from exhaustion. And sometimes... sometimes it would try to cover more of me, as though it wanted me to become a COVER and couldn't wait any longer.

This could not go on forever; I had to activate my internal Life Fibres as soon as possible. However, in order for that to happen, I had to let Mother know I wore the Kamui without her consent. How would I explain myself to her without giving away my plans? She would return tonight, I had to start thinking of what to tell her right that moment.

Mother would return from the United States tonight. I let that sink in, and once it did, I felt a shiver down my spine.

"Miss?"

Soroi's voice brought me back to reality.

"I'm awake, Soroi. Leave a cup of tea and two croissants on the table."

"Right away, Miss."

I walked to the far corner of my room, where the door to the attached bathroom was, and entered. First I brushed my teeth meticulously. Then I removed the Kamui and left it to air out, as it didn't need to be washed. I stepped in the shower. Out of instinct, I covered my

chest with my arms and began to look around, and kept my ears open for the sounds of footsteps. When I was sure there was nothing, I pressed a few buttons to the side, designed to automatically provide me with soap or shampoo as needed, and turned the shower knob. I still closed the door and curtain just to be safe. I knew that it would be futile to take precautions like this, but I still did nonetheless. I trained myself to spend as little time bathing as possible and to divert my thoughts elsewhere so that I never had to think about the water. There was also an automatic dryer right above the shower, programmed to activate as soon as I was done, so I never even had to be wet for long.

I stepped out of the shower door and changed into the Kiryuin uniform; white pants, white boots, a white collared shirt, and a white blazer. I decided not to wear the Kamui to the Academy, not until tonight. Then I combed my hair rigorously, to get rid of any tangles or knots that might be present. When I was sure I looked presentable, I picked up my satchel containing my tablet, left my room and made my way to the dining hall, to my dismay, Takaji was right there, looking rather displeased.

"Miss! I received word that you infiltrated Master Soichirou's lab and stole the Kamui! You know as well as I do that your mother specifically forbade you from wearing it! Even though you are the lady of the house in her absence, I cannot allow such wilful behaviour!"

I tried to hide my displeasure as best as I could.

"What's done is done, Takaji. I'll deal with the consequences tonight."

"I don't think you need to worry about that, Miss..."

My satchel began to vibrate, I took out the tablet from inside. Mother was calling me from the New York airport. Her timing was impeccable, as usual. I pressed the green "answer" button and a screen came up. She was wearing a full white business suit, high heels, and blue teardrop-shaped earrings. Houhoumaru and a couple of her other associates were close at hand, guarding her as she made her way to her private jet.

I swallowed thickly, trying my best to put up a brave face.

"What's this I hear, dear? That you managed to control the Kamui in spite of being merely human? Well, this is an interesting development indeed..."

Her voice was as it always was, seemingly affectionate but laced with spite. And she was smirking at me.

"Yes, Mother."

And I spoke as I always did to her, deferential and polite.

"Enough of this 'yes, mother' nonsense, dear. And apparently you obtained 99% in your last Advanced Mathematics paper and an abysmal 90% in your Advanced Economics project... what? Have you decided to neglect your studies to chase after something you can't hope to have?"

She was right. I was so worried about Haruka and the Kamui that I allowed my academics to take a backseat for a while.

"Forgive me, Mother. I was indeed distracted."

"And you're wearing that ghastly raiment again..."

"I will change into something more presentable when you return."

"Oh yes, please do, not that there's any need to anyway, honestly, dear, you sully every outfit you wear..."

I felt another chill down my spine and my palms began to feel sweaty. The tablet fell from my trembling hands. I managed to catch it before it fell to the floor, however. From the corner of my eye, I saw that Soroi was frowning, but Takaji had an arrogant scowl.

"What was that, dear?"

"Forgive me, mother, I was careless."

She scoffed and rolled her eyes.

"Oh, what else is new?"

Mother and her associates made it to the private jet, they began walking up the steps.

"As soon as I return we'll be going over your progress report, and then, the usual. Do not forget, if you do..." she gestured to her tablet, "I shall know."

"Yes, Mother. I will see you tonight."

The call ended. I picked up my teacup and began to drink, and then I started to eat my croissant, while at the same time glancing over at Takaji, that man was the Kiryuin family's most loyal retainer. He would support my mother through hell and fire. Even ten years ago, while her other staff members began abandoning her in droves thanks to those articles, he remained. He even testified on her behalf. I didn't even know if he knew that they weren't just malicious slander, but I doubt that it would have mattered to him. His allegiance was exclusively to my mother, after all. I was just an instrument to us both.

When I finished eating, which didn't take much time, Soroi and I walked to the main gate, where a limo was waiting for me. We drove for about ten minutes and reached our destination; the non-stop cable car station. Soroi paid the fare, and I got in one of the cars. Within a few minutes, I reached the Academy. I took the lift to the top floor and made my way to the Student Council room. I sat in my chair and looked over the console in the centre of the room.

First, I went over the surveillance cameras, last night there seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary. Then, I checked the Honnouji Academy map, designed to track students' comings and goings, to see if any of the Elite Six had reached by now. Iori appeared to be entering, but

no one else had arrived yet. Though to be fair, it was 7:00 in the morning and their reporting time wasn't until half an hour later.

I heard the door open behind me, and sure enough, he was there.

"Shiro Iori of Junior Division Class 4-A reporting for duty."

He walked towards the console and placed a tablet on the table, showing the day's headlines. The front-page news showed, "Anti-Uniform Guerrilla Attack Kills 20, Injures Hundred" with an accompanying picture showing chaos in the bustling streets of Honnouji's One Star Districts.

"They seem to be riled up again, my lady. According to your mother's spies, they're also planning to attack the Academy, for what, however, I am unsure."

Indeed I was also under the impression that the Conglomerate had managed to keep them pacified for the past ten years, and they were lying low for quite some time. What could have brought them out of hiding?

I realized I was being stupid by asking such a question.

"Matoi is either directly involved in the attack, or is the incentive behind it. When we are sure the Guerrilla is nearing the premises, I want her apprehended and kept in solitary confinement."

"And then what, my lady?"

"When the attack is over, I will have her eliminated."

Shiro was trying his best to appear neutral, but even he could not mask that his face was pale. I wasn't surprised, whenever I spoke of killing Haruka, it frightened him.

"My lady... Matoi is-"

"I know what she is."

"And yet... in spite of that-"

"Go."

He knew it was not the time to argue and left, presumably to pass the news on to the rest of my subordinates when they arrived.

Out of boredom, I began to flip through the surveillance cameras, and when I closed in on the One Star District, I saw a spiky-haired, muscular fellow enter the metro rail. When I closed up on him, I realized he was carrying a gun... a gun loaded with Anti Life Fibre ammunition.

To my relief, the door opened again.

"Gamagoori, prepare the emergency drills. We're going to have a few uninvited guests."

An Uninvited Guest

Water...

Clear blue, still water, fog, and steam as far as the eye can see. I try to focus on my surroundings, but my vision is blurry. My eyes are burning as if someone rubbed crushed pepper in them.

I can faintly hear the sound of a tap running; it's harsh and grating to my ears, as though the water is taunting me.

I suddenly feel a shiver down my spine. I'm ice cold even though the water's boiling; I use my arms to cover my naked body as much as I can.

The tap stops, but a few drops are still leaking.

Drip.

I cling to myself tighter, taking extra care to cover my breasts.

Drip.

I dig my nails into my shoulders and almost duck for cover.

Drip.

I can't move, but I want to get myself out, I want to get out, I must get out, if I don't get out...

Drip.

And then silence, an almost comforting silence, I heave a sigh of relief...

Without warning, a high pitched screech, I wince and bring my hands to my ears.

The hot water beneath me begins to bubble, it begins to slither around me like snakes. It coils around my legs, my arms, and my waist. It tugs at me. Fingers grip the underside of my chin and force me to look up - into icy blue eyes much like my own.

As soon as I stare into them, I screw my own eyes shut, hoping that will somehow make everything go away. I open them to find hands groping me up and down as the boiling water laps around me. I cry out in a mixture of pain and disgust as the icy cold hands squeeze my breasts hard enough that I can feel nails digging into the skin.

"Stop it..."

The hands begin moving downwards, pinching and squeezing in their wake. It doesn't stop, no matter how much I struggle. I'm thrown backwards and suddenly I'm underwater. I flail about, reaching for the surface, but I'm pulled deeper under. A hand is around my waist and

my legs are pried open. Before I can react, my heart leaps to my throat as I feel an overwhelming surge of electricity and heat. The pad of a finger speeds up against the bundle of nerves between my legs.

"No! Please, don't!"

My body feels pleasure, but the only emotion frantically racing through my brain is absolute terror. A hand covers my mouth, muffling me so that I can't even scream. I feel hair that is not my own tickling my neck, a pair of lips at my ear.

"That's it, my dear. No use in fighting. Just give in..."

I can barely breathe. My throat constricts like it's in a chokehold. Part of me wants to obey the voice. Stop screaming. Stop struggling. Just allow it to happen. Enjoy what's happening to you even though every fibre of your being tells you it's wrong. Even though every fibre of your being knows it's torture.

The fact that I entertain the idea of surrender at all fills me with shame. Shame that I brought upon myself. Shame that a failure like me deserves. With that thought, I relax, as the voice tells me to do. Once I reach that breaking point... it will all be over.

"Entrust your heart to me..."

Wait, what am I doing?! How could I submit to this?! How could I lay down and accept this?!

No! I can't give my heart to you! I can't let you violate me! I can't let you hurt me!

"STOP IT!"

"STOP IT! STOP IT! STOP-"

And then I felt a stinging pain on my right cheek. My blurry vision went from a wide expanse of blue to green and beige in an instant. I clutched the sides of my head on instinct and closed my eyes momentarily. When I opened them, I was met with the walls of Mako's room. I turned to see that Mako herself was right in front of me. She grabbed my shoulders and began to shake them roughly.

"Ryuko! Wake up! You were having a bad dream!"

Even though my vision was back to normal, my heart was throbbing in my throat and my body was shaking. I heard footsteps and the sound of the sliding door opening. Mataro was standing there, holding the left side of the door slightly ajar. He probably came here because of the commotion I had made. I was so shattered that I lacked the ability to even respond to him.

"Jeez, what the hell was that?" he grumbled, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

"Ryuko's been having nightmares lately," Mako explained, "This one seems even worse than the one before it."

She reached out to put an arm around my shoulder, but as soon as she touched me, I yelped in fear and leapt backwards.

"It's okay... it's fine. Just... just tell us what happened."

I looked down at my knees and furrowed my brows as I tried to recall that dream, however, the details were fuzzy.

"There was... steam and hot water. I think it was some kind of sauna. And... someone else was there. There was a voice..."

"Sounds like the same nightmare as last time..." Mako mused, "How did the voice sound? Was it a man or a woman speaking?"

I tried to recall... it was hard to hear in a dream of course, but... now that Mako mentioned it, I could somewhat describe what it sounded like. It was honeyed and somewhat sing-song, but carried an authority that shook me to the core.

"...a woman."

"And what happened once she entered this sauna?"

I wracked my brains, retracing how the events of the dream went. So it was a sauna, and I was terrified of that place for whatever reason, then this woman enters the room with me, and after that...

After that...?

When I tried to recall further, my throat constricted and I started feeling palpitations again. I felt myself involuntarily curling up in a fetal position and clenching my legs close together. My vision began turning blue again, like I was seeing underwater.

"No, no... no-"

Mako slapped me again. Once, twice, thrice, four times... until I came to my senses again. Her hands were gripping my shoulders like a vice. She was glaring at me, her expression a mix of worry and shock.

"Thanks... I needed that."

Once Mako felt I was settled enough, she let go of me again. I took another deep breath of air and began panting, realising that this exercise would go nowhere fast.

"I don't think I can remember... every time I try... it just..." I trailed off, staring at Mako and Mataro as we stood in silence.

Ryuko, have you come to your senses yet?

I have.

The other one, I believe she wishes to contact me again. That can be the only reason for a vision like this.

What? Does Satsuki want to pick up another fight with me?

Are you insinuating that the other Kamui's host is controlling her? I doubt it. Her host is a flesh-being, and therefore unaware of the Kamui's actions, how a flesh-being is able to wear her, however, is beyond me. It is likely that the Kamui wants to speak to me on her own.

But how the hell is this possible? And what do nightmares of drowning in a sauna have to do with any of this?!

I do not know, however, I am noticing a pattern. These visions only seem to occur if you wear me while asleep.

Hey, now that you mention it... you're right. I guess now we know how to stop them.

Mako and Mataro looked at each other, and then Mako pulled the blanket from me.

"Well, it's a good thing you're up now! Today's the big day, remember?"

I checked the clock on the wall, it was barely 6 A.M. I tried to remember what I did last night, I got home after a long day, I did my homework, and then I practiced for the Kendo tournament and collapsed in bed without changing...

"Oh, man, you're right. Today's the match against Osaka Academy! I'd better get ready fast or Uzu'll kill me!"

I sprinted to the bathroom and brushed and bathed as fast as I could. Mako and I ate quickly, Mataro was taking his own sweet time however, as his school didn't start in an hour and a half and he was too young to have any clubs.

"Ryuko, are you all right? I heard you woke up screaming." Mako's mom inquired as she served me croquettes, her eyes grave with concern.

"I had a nightmare, but I'm okay now, I guess." I managed.

She didn't press me further. After we ate, Mako and I took the tramway and I decided to push the nightmare out of my mind for now. I had bigger things to worry about. According to the other club members, Osaka's kendo team was pretty fierce, and I had to be at the top of my game if I wanted to win a match or two...

"Two things: One: We managed to pull it off. Two: Now we have enough food, raw material, and medical supplies to last for another six months."

"Good..."

Mikisugi's still loading his gun with anti-Life Fibre needles; he doesn't even look up as he's talking to me. While he does so, I absentmindedly look around the room. There isn't much

here. The sickly grey paint is already peeling off the walls, the only pieces of furniture here are a small fridge in the corner, a cupboard with glass doors, a cot, and the table and chair where Mikisugi's working. I don't mind however, Ishin Matoi never cared for aesthetics.

"How many casualties?" He asks.

"I thought you said you didn't care about 'prissy One-Star' lives."

He smirks smugly, chuckling, and continues with his work.

"I don't, but I care about being conspicuous. If we kill too many, the Kiryuins may see us as a bigger threat and want to take direct action. As you can plainly see, we aren't ready to take them head-on as of yet. "

"The Ogure News Network says about 20 were killed, but over a hundred were injured."

"Did they see you?"

"No."

He finishes loading his gun and turns to look at me, he moves his hair out of his face.

"Oh, then it's not much of a big deal."

Mikisugi walks to the cupboard at the end of the room, and throws me a bundle of clothes, one-star clothes. I don't get where he's going with this, but I guess he has another plan in mind.

"Tomorrow, you need to wear this on top of your uniform and board the One-Star Metro Rail. Just you, don't take anyone else with you. This needs to be a low key operation."

"Where do you want me to go this time?"

He makes a tsk sound with his tongue, and glares at me as if I asked a stupid question.

"Honnouji Academy's going to host a Kendo tournament tomorrow. The students are going to be mostly involved in that, they'll be hyped, there will be confusion, and there will be commotion. The participants are going to be too focused on winning their matches to even notice your intrusion..."

I resist the urge to throw something at him, is he out of his goddamn mind?

"With Honnouji Academy's security being as tight as it is, I'd be dead before I even stepped in there. Besides, that place is ruled by Kiryuin scum-"

"Oh? I'm pretty sure that's why you'd want to go there in the first place."

He turns to a photo crudely taped on the wall, a photo of a woman in her early twenties or so with brown hair in a messy pony-tail wearing a red tee-shirt and tattered jean shorts, smiling

for the camera. She had her arms around a sixteen-year-old boy with equally messy hair and tattered clothes.

"Do you want Kinue's sacrifice to go in vain, Kinagase?"

The memory of that day seventeen years ago hits me like a train, and I feel my blood boil.

"If I did, I wouldn't have joined the likes of you in the first place."

"Let's put it this way... what I want you to do is, well... there's someone at Honnouji Academy who will be of great interest to you, when you see her, you'll know."

"Ishin Matoi's daughter?"

He opens the miniature fridge next to him and takes out a can of beer, he offers me one, I shake my head. He opens the can and begins to drink.

"You're quick to catch on."

"How much did you tell her exactly?"

"Just enough for her to have an idea of Dr. Matoi's plans."

"Does she know?"

"Know what?"

"About what Kinue and I knew?"

He shakes his head.

"Oh good heavens, no. If she did, that would have been a disaster. However, I have a suspicion that someone else does."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"...Simple. You find out if my suspicions are correct."

"And if they are...?"

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a USB stick, he throws it in my direction and I catch it with my right hand.

"Have the evidence this person has gathered brought to me. It will come in handy someday..."

...

It seemed laughable that I was going to infiltrate Honnouji Academy disguised as a journalist, given how much I hated the press, but hey, anything to further the Guerrilla's cause.

I began rummaging through my bag to make sure my gun wasn't visible, looking around furtively for trouble. I began fiddling with the fake ID on my neck, looking at it every few seconds, as though it would fall off if I didn't watch over it long enough.

I felt my stomach tighten as the Academy came into view. I didn't know how Kinue would have felt knowing that Ragyo Kiryuin's little puppet called all the shots over there; I imagined she'd be even more shocked if she knew what my task was.

"Look, it's a great deal. Nine months of free room and board, all the food we can eat, warm beds, nice clothes. Plus, I'm going to get paid- stop giving me that face. Look, I know you're worried about me, I'm aware of the risk and consequences. But I'm doing this for you, for us. Have a little faith in me. I'll be fine..."

"I'll be fine..."

If only she knew what they were going to do to her afterwards. If only she knew what kind of people the Kiryuins really were. If she knew... she would still be alive.

"Matoi, step forward."

I did as I was told and held the wooden kendo sword in my trembling hands. I tried to remember all those hours of practice and all the formalities and whatnot as I looked my opponent in the eye. She was a two-star, I could tell from her uniform. She was kind of short but had big arms. So I needed to watch out for her strikes. I wished I didn't have to keep my scissor blade in my bag, which was sitting there in the girls' locker room. If I had it, the whole tournament would be much shorter.

Ryuko, this flesh-being appears to be a more experienced fighter than you. Do not take her lightly.

You say that about everyone here.

I'm only telling you the truth. However, she has one weakness. Her weight appears to exceed yours, which means you are likely to have the upper hand in speed.

"My name's Ayako Tsukasa of the Osaka Academy Kendo Club, pleased to meet you."

There was an awkward pause as I tried to make sense of what she said; I found the Osakan dialect a bit hard to understand.

"My name is Ryuko Matoi of the Honnouji Academy Kendo Club, pleased to make your acquaintance."

She began smirking arrogantly at me, did she know that I was a hybrid and therefore, would be disadvantaged against me? I began to wonder, a hybrid creating dissent in Honnouji Academy... by now, it should have been all over the papers and internet, and Ragyo or her

henchmen would have tried to deal with me directly. I wondered why Satsuki and her precious mother haven't made so much as a peep about it all this time.

I turned to Uzu awkwardly, I knew he had it out for me ever since we first met, but even he could acknowledge that I was a quick learner. If it were up to his whims and fancies, he'd probably have me warm benches the whole time. But he wanted Honnouji Academy to win, and he needed all the good players to participate for that.

In the audience, both the Osaka and Honnouji students alike were chattering amongst themselves, probably placing their bets on who would win or sharing gossip about the opposing team's players. In the lower rungs of the bleachers were a couple of Ogure journalists taking photos with their tablets and recording videos. It might have been my imagination, but one of them, the muscular one with the red Mohawk, had his tablet directly focused on me.

In the VIP seat, far above the rest of them, I noticed that Satsuki wasn't there on the Honnouji side of the audience. That bothered me; it probably meant she was cooking up some other scheme. On the Osaka side, there was a boy with orange dyed hair and glasses wearing an orange and black jacket, a white collared shirt and black pants. He had a lot of gold rings on his fingers and I could have sworn he had a gold tooth as well. He looked like he didn't want to come. His legs were crossed, he had one hand resting on his cheek, he was tapping his fingers on the armrest of his seat impatiently, and face was all surly.

Mako told me exactly what dyed hair meant. She said that all over Japan there were seven 'prominent families' each with a monopoly over a particular field. Each family chose to associate themselves with a particular colour, perhaps as a way of saying 'look at our fancy monochrome outfits and dyed hair, they mean that we're rich as hell! So respect us you plebs!' And all of them were loyal to the Kiryuins. Maiko's family, the Ogure family, from Tokyo, was in charge of mass media. Uzu was part of the Sanageyama family from Kyoto, which managed food and drug production. And the boy in the VIP box had orange hair and was from Osaka, so he was part of the Takarada family, which was in charge of all financial institutions.

Before Uzu could start counting down, the stadium door opened and a girl with long hair in a ponytail, dyed red, so she was probably from one of those prominent families, wearing a long white lab coat, a translucent orange mask on her face, and goggles on her head. She looked a little young to be in the senior division, I wondered why she was here and why Uzu suddenly dropped everything because of her presence.

Hmmm... it appears this flesh being is 30% bonded with Life Fibres.

30%...? Oh. You mean she's a three-star.

"Iori, what brings you here?"

She walked up to Uzu and began to whisper in his ear. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but Uzu began scowling after hearing it.

"On whose authority?" he asked curtly.

"Who else's?"

My eyes widened in shock when I realized the girl Uzu was talking to, this Iori person, was actually a boy.

"Kaname," he gestured to a first year girl with twin ponytails. "You'll take over this round in Matoi's stead. Matoi, you go with Iori."

Wait... did this mean I would be absent for the first round? The tournament hadn't even started yet and I was being pulled out?! Maybe Satsuki didn't want me to win the tournament after I managed to pass No-Late Day last month.

"Okay, what the hell?!"

"Calm yourself. Either you will come with me, or I'll drag you out of the stadium, now would you like that?"

"You think I'm going to let some puny eighth-grader tell me what to do?!"

"That 'puny eighth grader' is Lady Satsuki's cousin, Matoi. Just go with him. You're embarrassing us."

Now I was hopping mad, I wanted to beat Uzu silly and thrash that stupid Iori guy into the ground. I wasn't going to miss my chance to advance in the ranks and therefore, delay my chances of getting any more answers from this goddamn place.

Don't. There will most likely be other opportunities for you to prove yourself. Initiating combat with either one of these flesh-beings is most unwise as you do not have the Rending Scissors with you. Go with them, it will save you a lot of trouble.

Great, even Senketsu was against me. I guessed I had no sane options before me then. I decided that I would let this Iori guy take me away from the tournament, but I wasn't going to like it. I was scowling with my hands in my pockets and stomping the ground as we walked out of the stadium to wherever he was leading me.

At that moment, I remembered the nightmare I had last night. The last time I had a nightmare like that, Satsuki called me over to fight her. I knew Satsuki had no control over the dreams and that was the other Kamui's work, but I couldn't help but wonder. Was she asking for the same thing again?

"How can Satsuki expect me to fight her if I don't have the Rending Scissors with me?" I asked that Iori guy, not expecting an answer. Surprisingly, he did answer me as we walked about the halls.

"Lady Satsuki left the Academy after second period, Haruka..."

Huh? Why was he calling me that? I thought everyone knew that was just a pseudonym. I should have been pissed that he called me by my first name in spite of not knowing me, but instead, I was just confused. The weirdest part was how his voice just kind of faltered after calling me that.

"...I mean, Matoi. The Student Database still has that as your name."

Now things were getting really weird. There was no way whoever was in charge of that database didn't deliberately refuse to update my information.

"Why? What is she trying to hide me from?"

"Follow me."

That Iori guy wasn't saying anything more, I guessed that he had spoken too much, which was good for me. So Satsuki was trying to hide my existence from pretty much everyone outside the Academy, including the Kiryuin Conglomerate, for some weird reason. I mean, if she wanted me dead, she could have just run to her mother and asked her to do the dirty work, but she seemed to be hell bent on facing me on her own... why? And what was all that crap she was saying earlier, about how I wanted to "take the throne from her" or some bullshit like that?

This just made me even more pissed off; I decided I didn't care about doing the sane thing anymore. I wasn't going to play Satsuki's little games.

Ryuko... do not even think about it-

Too late!

I punched the Iori guy in the back of his head. Since he was a scrawny little kid, he fell over pretty fast. Then I began to sprint as fast as I could, looking behind me occasionally to make sure that I lost him. I had to make it back to the girls' locker room and into the stadium in time. While running, I stepped on a hard object, a USB stick. I grabbed it and stuffed it in my pocket; I could probably sell it later.

I was about to enter the locker room, but ended up bumping into someone face first. I was pushed away, and was staring in the face of the journalist with the red mohawk who was staring at me earlier.

"Where do you think you're going, Kiryuin scum?"

Wait, what? I mean, I wasn't surprised that he assumed that I was working for them. However, if he spoke about the Kiryuins that way... he was most definitely not a journalist.

Do not engage in any form of confrontation with this one. Your assumptions about him being opposed to our kind are correct, he possesses weaponry designed to eliminate us.

How do you know that?

The alloy used to create these weapons is powerful against our kind. We begin to experience adverse effects once we are within a 5-meter radius of said alloy.

...that means if he wants to fight us, we're dead.

"Hey, what gives?"

"Go, get out of my sight."

I didn't understand what his problem was, but he made way for me and I was about to open the door, and he stood in front of me again, seemingly changing his mind about letting me through.

"That thing in your pocket, hand it over."

"Okay, how the hell do you know that I-"

"Listen, we can do this the easy way, or the hard way. If we do this the easy way, you hand over that USB stick, we part ways, and we continue about our business. If you want to do this the hard way, well... let's just say that you and that parasite taped to your back won't last long."

He knows about you as well?! What the hell is this guy?!

Wait a minute, do you recall when you first came to this city? When that man told you about his organization designed to oppose us?

Wait... you weren't activated at that time, how do you- oh, right. You can access my memories at any time you like. So... are you saying that this guy is part of Dad's resistance faction?

It would be best if you found out.

"Hey, you used to work for Ishin Matoi, right?"

"Two things: One, I'm not making an exception for you because you're Ishin Matoi's daughter. Two, since you're not going to cooperate with me, we're going to do this the hard way." He reached inside his coat and took out a gun.

Ryuko, run!

I sprinted as fast as I could, turning my syringe glove as I ran, I was able to run much faster after transforming. Several needles passed by me, I guessed they were made from the alloy Senketsu was talking about, because my head started to ache when they got close by. I ran up the stairs to the first floor, swerving through the One-Star corridors and looking behind me ever so often to make sure I lost that Mohawk guy.

I hid behind a pillar, hoping I really did lose him, but then I felt a sharp shooting pain in my left shoulder and saw that a needle was sticking out of it. Senketsu had reverted back to normal, and I collapsed on the floor, my stomach churning as though I was going to throw up and my limbs entirely paralyzed. I could see, but my vision was blurry.

I saw that the USB stick was strewn on the floor near me, and I saw the Mohawk guy pick it up, and then I saw that Gamagoori guy and Iori had caught up to him, they were arguing, I couldn't understand what they were saying, and the Mohawk guy pulled something out of his disguise and the whole corridor was covered in smoke.

The combination of the needle-bullets and the smoke made me feel so sick that I couldn't help but pass out.

...

I wasn't entirely sure where I was when I woke up, but I knew I was still in the Academy. When I saw the wooden floors and the table with papers and files carelessly strewn on it, I realized I was in the staff room.

"Ah, you're awake."

I knew that voice all too well. When I became aware of our position, my head in his lap and his hand running fingers through my hair, I turned slightly pink.

"What... how did I-"

"What do you think? I dragged you here and patched you up. Anti-Life Fibre ammunition is near-lethal to the likes of you. You're lucky that you were hit with just one bullet."

I wanted to ask him if he knew the Mohawk guy, and whether he was involved in the attack or not, wait... no. He couldn't have been. He was on my side.

"Who was... that guy with the mohawk? He said he worked for Dad."

"Oh, Kinagase? I told him not to come here, but he did anyway. He was going on about how Lady Satsuki had some important documents that we could use against her... I thought coming here was suicide, but I underestimated him. He doesn't know I'm mentoring you, I'll tell him to lay off hereafter."

Kinagase... so that was his name, his last name at least.

"The... the tournament..."

"Honnouji won 4-3, don't worry. I bet you wish you could have been there. Don't worry, there will be other opportunities."

He certainly read my mind about that one. I bet if I was there, we could have won by an even bigger margin. However, I couldn't feel entirely angry at present.

"Why did Satsuki not want me participating?"

"She probably sensed that Kinagase would be coming, she probably thought you called him here. She didn't want you conspiring with him. Or perhaps, this was intended, and she wanted to kill you by proxy. Either way, she failed, thankfully."

Just thinking about dying by one of those bullets made me shiver, enough to curl up closer to him.

"It's all right... you're safe now," he consoled me, sensing my distress, "I'll tell Kinagase not to attack you again."

Even though we only knew each other for a few months, I found myself trusting Mikisugi's words implicitly. I remembered how Dad only looked out for me when it was convenient for him, my teachers back in the colony who treated me like dirt, the street gangs I joined just to have some semblance of belonging... it seemed that Mikisugi cared for my welfare more than any of them combined.

I decided I really was safe around him, and sighed, drifting off to sleep again.

8:50 PM on the dot, the alarm on my tablet rang. I remembered when I was still small and ignorant, I used to shake in my boots or cry in my mother's presence. Now I was only careful, careful about every thought and action, and I would watch her intently to see any change in mood.

I began to walk briskly down the stairs, not because I was excited about my mother's return, but because I knew she would be enraged if I took more than a few minutes to make it to the main gate. Soroi, Takaji, a couple of other maids, and myself were standing there, and then when the clock struck nine, the limousine began to make its way into the main grounds. Houhoumaru got down first, her dyed purple curls were neatly braided and her suit was just as pristine as ever, then Nagita, who was wearing an identical white suit and began smoothening hair and adjusting his glasses. His inky blue eyes, matching his hair, as was the case with COVERS, were fixated on me. And finally, my mother, my legs began to shake, out of habit, but I held my ground. I knew I couldn't show any fear in front of her.

It would be over soon, I told myself. I would explain my actions to her as I rehearsed, she would go over my progress report with me, and I would make a note of where I could improve on, and afterwards, our meetings would last for only half an hour, and I would be sent to bed. It was the same story for ten years, it was par for the course, and most of all, I deserved no less. At least, until my internal life fibres were activated, at which point Mother would finally acknowledge me as an equal.

"Good Evening, Mother." I bowed deeply, staying like that for a few seconds, and then rose.

She began to stare at me up and down, scrutinizing my appearance and smiling as she did. I remembered to wear the Kamui when she returned, as proof that I was able to control it. I hoped that nothing else was wrong. My hair was neatly combed and styled, and I made sure to wear powder, lipstick, and eyeshadow on my face. Mother always said that makeup was no different from clothing, a means of covering up one's deficiencies.

"So Takaji wasn't lying after all," she sighed, "*Quelle surprise.*"

"Indeed, Mother. I will explain my motives for wearing the Kamui when we are alone."

She chuckled.

"Un simple humain contrôle les fibres vivants. La vie est vraiment drôle."

I understood every word she said, Mother had taken it upon herself to make sure I knew more than one language, so alongside Japanese and English, I was taught French, the language of my maternal grandmother.

"Allons nous entrer, Maman?"

I hoped she would acknowledge my mastery of the language.

"Very well, it appears we have been out here too long. Come with me."

She led me back into the manor, the moment she wrapped her arms around my shoulder, my skin went ice cold. Years ago, I would have welcomed the contact, now I know better.

"How was your flight?"

She scoffed.

"Why bother with such questions, dear?"

And as usual, my attempts to be a considerate daughter were rebuffed. I knew better than to explain my intentions to her, so I kept quiet as we walked up the stairs to her chambers. She pressed her finger to the biometric reader near the door, and we walked in. When the door closed, she grabbed my chin and turned my face upwards so that our eyes met.

"Why did you do it?" she snapped, her tone accusatory and interrogative.

"Forgive me for my disobedience, Mother, but while you were gone, I had gone through the research in Father's lab regarding the transformation of humans into hybrids. One particular report stated that 0.1% of hybrid attempts remain dormant until the host either goes through a near-death experience or is exposed to clothing with more than 60% life fibres for a year or more."

Mother's expression didn't seem to soften, even though I gave no indication of only partially telling the truth.

"...Soichirou was a hack, dear, a hack who couldn't possibly comprehend the greatness of life fibres. And of course, you, so exceedingly like your father, followed his words. How could you arrogantly assume that you would be that 0.1%, even though you've shown yourself to be nothing more than the black sheep of the Kiryuin family?"

Soroi always told me my father was a great man, and that before Mother had succumbed to her internal life fibres, she and my father were deeply in love. It still surprised me, after all these years, to hear her say such things about him. Sometimes, I didn't know who to believe.

"I wanted to change that."

"You want to activate your internal life fibres..."

"Yes, Mother."

She didn't let go of me for a couple of minutes, still staring into my eyes to see if I was telling the truth or not. I knew how to keep my face neutral in spite of my feelings; I had to learn this if I wanted to be strong.

"Well, if you can wear the Kamui like this, your assumption was correct. And you've shown leadership and initiative, I cannot deny that. However, you will have to undergo extensive preparation for the next five months in order to prove yourself worthy of becoming a hybrid."

Her free hand grabbed my waist and pulled me closer.

"Are you willing to do so?"

She squeezed my right breast, hard. I held back the urge to push her away or even squirm or cry out in discomfort.

"Y-yes."

"Hmm... prove it to me with your actions. Now, as for your academic performance..."

She brought out her tablet and opened the Student Report application designed by the Academy, which gave a detailed overview of a student's marks and class performance. She began to go through my assignments, projects and tests with me from all my subjects, one by one. If I made even one error, be it in neatness, framing a sentence properly, or answering a question wrong, she would make dry remarks about my intelligence and tell me where I went wrong. All I did was nod in agreement the entire time, remembering to make a note of all these mistakes, and never attempt them again.

And of course, at 9:30, she stopped.

"We will continue this conversation in a more... private location." And gestured to the bathrobe on the bed.

I knew there was no point in prolonging the inevitable, so I stripped. I tried my level best to fight off the intense shame and the cold shivers down my spine as I changed into the bathrobe. I made sure to do this task quickly and quietly, never stopping to look back at the eyes that I knew were fixated on me.

Even though I was well used to what was to come, my legs felt like jelly, but I willed to move all the same. I solemnly followed her to the grand baths, trying not to think about what would happen next. I began to think of more ways to eliminate Haruka, and I had to do so soon. If Mother came to know she was still alive, all my work for the past seven years would be for nothing.

The Interim

I had gotten accustomed to living alone for those two months, accustomed to bathing in the morning and going to bed without having to dry myself and change first. I guessed that was why I spent some time staring at my bedroom ceiling, fighting off nausea and the feeling of a thousand caterpillars crawling about my skin before going to sleep. And being unable to sleep properly last night was probably why my eyes were red and swollen the next morning.

I knew I didn't have to spend too much time getting ready; I had already bathed the night before. All I had to do was wash myself quickly, in less than five minutes and touch myself up with mascara, concealer to hide the dark circles, and a bit of rouge and lipstick for good measure. I had no other choice but to wear the Kamui today, I had to keep wearing it until Mother deemed me worthy to become a Hybrid.

I looked in the mirror; the girl in front of me was strong, beautiful, and confident. Everything I knew I, as the scion of the Kiryuin family, was supposed to be. Wearing the mask of the model successor however, was not enough. I looked down at my legs to see if they were still shaking, luckily, they weren't. So I took that as a sign I was presentable enough to come down the stairs.

Mother was there, wearing a full white business suit, sitting in the dining room, fork and knife in hand as she ate her croissants and tea. Takaji and Soroï were by her side as well. Even Iori was sitting there across from my mother, wearing his lab coat over his uniform, eyes fixated on his meal.

"Good morning, Mother." I spoke clearly, not too loudly, not too softly, and bowed.

She looked up from her breakfast and smiled at me in an attempt to mimic human maternal tenderness.

"Good morning, dear. Come here, sit."

I sat down next to her, making sure not to make any noise as I pulled the chair out. I stared at my breakfast for a minute, and then started to eat; glancing at Mother from the corner of my eye occasionally to make sure I was doing nothing to provoke her. I knew Iori was listening, despite his attempts to pretend to be oblivious. I wondered sometimes how much he really knew.

"I've heard that Honnouji Academy won a kendo tournament against Osaka yesterday."

The kendo tournament. I felt my stomach flip, I hoped she wouldn't ask anything about Haruka.

"Yes, indeed. Sanageyama has trained his subordinates well."

"Uzu Sanageyama? A disgrace to his name, well, at least his older brother has been named the heir. I would have considered him when you were younger, but you deserve better, my

dear." She sighed, caressing my cheek. The contact made the blood drain from my face.

"I never considered him as a potential suitor, Mother."

I knew that once I finished university, I'd have to marry a man from one of The Big Seven or from a prominent family abroad to carry on the family line. It was something I never really looked forward to. Luckily though, since children of the Kiryuin family and The Seven were born by surrogacy, I'd never have to subject myself to the physical method of bearing a child.

"Well, that's a relief."

I didn't respond to her and continued to eat. The talk of suitors, however, made me think of Mother and Father, and the things Soroι told me about them.

"Every other Kiryuin had an arranged marriage and had their children artificially. They all saw their spouses as little more than subordinates or colleagues. Your mother, however, was an exception. She loved your father very much, Miss, and he felt the same."

"What family was my father from?"

"That's just it, Miss. Your father was a common Three-Star. He earned his place at your mother's side by talent alone, because he invented the Kamui. He wanted to become REVOCS' head tailor. He had plans to make a uniform entirely out of Life Fibres but thought it was impossible. It was your mother who encouraged him to pursue his dreams."

"Soroι, if Mother loved Father so dearly, why did she let him and Haruka die?"

"Because your mother is also dead now, Miss, metaphorically speaking. Your father figured that out when she didn't shed a tear when Haruka died."

When I finished eating, she turned to me and snapped me out of my thoughts.

"Oh, and before I forget, it seems that you've accepted several transfer students this year," she brought out her tablet to access the school records, "Junior Division has a total of twenty, and Senior has about ten. Hmm... most of them seem to have potential, so I guess you aren't taking in random students out of sympathy then."

Eleven, I thought to myself. I had deleted Haruka's records long before Mother could take a look at them. She also reminded me, indirectly, of how little time I had left.

"We will discuss further when you come home from school." She got up from her chair and walked out of the dining room and into the hallway to take the lift downstairs, to REVOCS' lab. When she left, Iori and I also walked outside the manor and into the limo, and we drove to the non-stop cable car station. From there, we made our way to the Academy.

When we stepped into the council room, Iori looked at me, as though he wanted to tell me something but was afraid of my reaction.

"Out with it."

"It's about Haruka."

This was nothing new, I knew just how vehemently opposed he was to all this.

"Do you have any other ideas? What would you do, Iori? If there was a chance that all your hard work would go for naught, what would you do?"

"I understand that, but... is fratricide really the answer?"

"Princes of old murdered their brothers in their sleep, Cain killed Abel, Ayako Kiryuin, my great grandmother poisoned her sister to become the heir. Why is this any different?"

"She doesn't know anything about-"

"And I prefer to keep it that way. If Mother discovered her..."

I stopped myself from saying anything more. Iori furrowed his brows at this.

"Are you all right, my lady?" he asked, eyes full of concern.

"Leave me be, Iori."

He decided that I would tell him nothing and left the room. I took my tablet out of my satchel and made my way to the console. I had some plans that needed to be revised.

I was awake, but my eyes were still closed. I felt someone's arms were wrapped around me, pulling me close. This was an obvious sign I wasn't at Mako's house, but I didn't really care. I sighed, cuddling up to whomever it was holding me and wrapping an arm around them in turn.

"Morning, sleep well?"

I heard a familiar voice bring me out of my slumber for good, and he began to run his fingers through my hair. I looked around and realized that I wasn't in the staff room... I was in Mr. Mikisugi's apartment. Both of us were asleep on a small cot in the middle of the room.

I didn't know what possessed me to do so, maybe it was because of the strange fuzzy feeling in my chest, but I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. I moved closer to him, my hand clinging to his shirt as I kissed him again, several times. Then I sighed and buried my face in the crook of his neck. I felt him move slightly, so that we were facing each other. He placed one hand on the back of my head and the other on my waist, and brought my lips to his.

I was shocked for a few seconds, it was the first time anyone had ever kissed me, but it didn't take me long for me to respond. I sighed happily and pulled him even closer. I thought I could hear someone calling out to me in the background, but I was too contented to care.

Ryuko!

Sure enough, Senketsu's piercing voice caused me to break apart, much to my annoyance.

You're angry with me for snapping you out of your delirium? You should know better than that.

I was going to get up in a minute, you know.

If we're going by the conventions of your kind, that's just a roundabout way of saying you weren't going to get up at all.

What the hell is your problem anyway?

Flesh beings... so easily distracted by emotions, no wonder we have to discipline you constantly.

All right, all right, I'll get up, Jeez.

"We... we're going to be late at this rate." The colour began to rise in my cheeks when I realized I had said 'we,' as though we were in a relationship.

"I suppose you're right..."

I reluctantly let go of him and sat up on the bed. I also remembered that I didn't have any drowning nightmares last night, which was good, even though I knew I was wearing Senketsu. Maybe the other Kamui wanted nothing to do with me today.

I suddenly remembered that I was staying in someone else's house and that Mako probably had no idea where I was.

"What about-"

"I know, I know, you think Mankanshoku's worried about you. I explained the situation to her and her family. Don't stress yourself out."

"Th-thanks, but-"

"I bought some extra toiletries for you to use in the meanwhile, you can get ready here."

"Are you sure that-"

"It's fine... don't worry about it."

I looked at the clock on the wall, it was about 6:45; I had some time before school started. The door to the bathroom was in the left-hand corner. It was small but cleaner than Mako's bathroom. Unfortunately, Senketsu refused to shut up and he kept "talking" to me as I got ready.

You are getting carried away. You ought to know your limits. His touch is enough to shut you off from my input and your surroundings. It could get you in trouble in the future.

I didn't respond to him and just focused on brushing my teeth. After that, I turned on the shower and began to take a bath, which allowed me some peace and quiet for a while. I towel-dried my hair and wore Senketsu again, and I stepped out of the bathroom. I didn't take too long to get ready, only 20 minutes. I grabbed the toothbrush and the bar of soap and kept them back in the clear plastic bag where I found them. Mr Mikisugi entered the bathroom after I left, and closed the door. On a table near the cot, I saw two rice balls, presumably one for me and one for him. I grabbed one of them and ate it quickly. I waited for ten minutes and he was ready, and sat down in front of me, eating the rice ball that was remaining. I realized I had some questions I needed to ask before I left.

"Well, since we're here, I think I should bring you up to speed with our plans. Your mid-terms begin in September, and I'm sure you know what that means... don't you?"

Crap, I had forgotten about mid-terms next month. The marks you scored in your mid-terms determined how far you'd go, or conversely, how far you'd slide in rank in the Transfer Ceremony in October. I knew that in order to advance to One-Star, I needed a 70% average.

"Great, I have to slog until I get a 7.0."

"I'd give the question paper to you, but unfortunately, I won't be able to help you after that point academics wise, seeing as I only teach No-Star students. If you work for it now, it will be easier to climb in rank next mid-term. I can, however, give you a helping hand. See me in my office today and I'll give you some past papers. Don't show them to Mako, but that should go without saying."

I began to feel uneasy and nauseous. I felt like I knew I was going to fail even before exams started, and unlike before, I actually had a reason to work hard.

"If it makes you feel any better, Matoi, I corrected your class' maths homework and you only got two wrong. And your grades in other subjects have been getting better, so if you have an incentive, you're capable of quite a bit."

I found it strange, yet reassuring that Mr Mikisugi was able to pick up on what I was feeling without my saying it. The Black Stripes never gave a damn how I felt, nor did The Blue Squares, all they cared about was whether I could be a decent fighter or not. And as for Dad, well, a call or at least a letter would have been nice.

"I wanna ask you something."

"Yes?"

"When I wear Senketsu while asleep, I sometimes have nightmares involving water. Senketsu thinks it's because Satsuki's Kamui is trying to reach out to him, but I'm not so sure. You said Dad told you a bit about how Kamui work, did he mention this?"

He began furrowing his brows and placed a hand on his chin, his expression pensive.

"You said all these nightmares involve water, never anything else?"

"Nope."

"Hmm, can't say your dad ever mentioned anything about that. And I'm still not sure how Satsuki's Kamui can communicate with yours, but I have a suspicion that the dreams are less to do with the Kamui and more to do with the host."

"So you're saying they're Satsuki's doing?"

"I have a feeling it's a group effort, so to speak."

I didn't understand why Satsuki would want to use her Kamui to give me visions about drowning though, and why she would focus on something so specific. What was she really after anyway? I knew she wanted to kill me, but why would she go to such lengths to hide this from Ragyo?

"And then there was what she told me... when we fought..."

"It's clear she sees you as some kind of threat but doesn't want to go after you herself."

"It's because I'm a Hybrid and she's human, right?"

"Yes, and no. You know, Satsuki could have been a Hybrid as well. She went under the knife when she was born, but her internal Life Fibres didn't get activated. She's most likely resentful that you have the one thing she doesn't."

I realized that Dad never told me exactly how I went under the knife, or when, but I guessed that I, like her, had gone through the procedure as a baby. I couldn't imagine subjecting a little kid who had just been born to something so painful. I heard that they cut your head open, let the Life Fibres attach to your brain and spinal cord, stitched you back, and then tried to activate them through various means like electrocution or poking needles through your entire body. Most teenagers and adults die during the procedure; I wondered how I managed to come out of it alive.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that it made sense. Satsuki's Kamui didn't turn her into a COVER like it should have, but wearing it did take a toll on her strength. This also frightened me. If Satsuki was this strong without her internal Life Fibres, I didn't want to know what kind of strength she'd have as a Hybrid.

"And also, your kind can't be killed with normal weapons. You've probably noticed that you can recover from injuries quicker than normal people can. Only Anti-Life Fibre ammunition can do the trick, stuff like Kinagase's guns, Satsuki's sword, or the Rending Scissors. And even then, those kinds of weapons can only seriously injure you unless they cut your Nexus Thread."

"Wait a minute, I thought only Kamui and uniforms had Nexus Threads..."

"Hybrids have them too; think of it as an Achilles Heel, if you will. If Satsuki was a Hybrid, she'd be able to use her Kamui to find yours and off you for good, but fortunately, this isn't

the case."

Senketsu, did you hear that?

Why ask such a question? I can see what you see, hear what you hear, feel what you feel-

I get it, I get it. Why didn't you tell me that I had a Nexus Thread earlier?

Why didn't you ask?

Just tell me now.

Hmm... in your navel, to be precise, the point where your umbilical cord was severed.

...my bellybutton?

Correct. If that man asks however, lie. I do not trust him.

I didn't agree with Senketsu on that one, but just to be on the safe side, I decided to do what he said for now.

"So does... Senketsu know where your Threads are?"

"Uhh... yeah. He said they were in the pulse point in my neck."

"Good thing Satsuki and her associates don't know that. And remember to keep blocking that part of you when you fight."

"That should go without saying."

I looked at the clock on the wall, it was now 7:30. It took about twenty minutes for the tramway to go from here to the Academy, and it was always better to be there a little earlier.

"It would be best if you went back to the Mankanshoku house now, leaving from here would look... odd to say the least."

Damn him and his ability to sense what I was thinking, he may as well have been another Senketsu. I got up, grabbed the plastic bag and put it in my schoolbag, which I noticed was right by the door. I checked my front pocket to see if my scissor blade was inside it, thankfully it was.

Before I left, I wanted to thank him for everything he's done, but when our eyes met, my face turned bright red and I ended up being at a loss for words.

"I... I just want to say..."

"No need to thank me."

He closed the gap between us and kissed me again, I had to stand on my tiptoes and wrap my arms around his neck for support seeing as he was a full head taller than me. After a couple

of seconds, we broke apart. I opened the door and began to walk down the stairs, still somewhat dazed.

...What was it the man who created me, and by extension, your father used to say?

Don't lose your way.

And what are you doing right now? In spite of my warnings?

What are you talking about? I know exactly what I have to do from here. I have to focus on mid-terms!

I do not understand something, your species' desire for emotional and physical proximity. Such a thing is unnecessary for progress, in fact, it hinders it. It's also quite baffling that you would consider the assertion of control to be a pleasurable experience.

Oh yeah, I almost forgot about how you and your ilk essentially rape people to keep them in line.

There is venom in your tone, a clear reflection of your repulsion towards the practice.

Do you do it to your own kind as well, or just to humans?

We lack what your kind would call sex organs; we reproduce by bisection. So such assertions would be impossible to attempt.

I realized when I stepped out of the apartment complex that I wasn't entirely sure of the way to Mako's house from here. I began wandering around, looking for landmarks. I remembered the red light district being ten minutes from her house, and I knew it was that because the buildings were a gaudy shade of pink to distinguish them from everything else. I also remembered the blinking neon lights nearby with the words, "Mankanshoku Back Alley Clinic," which clued me in to my being close to her home. I saw Mako and Mataro walking out the front door, and Mako ran towards me and grabbed my shoulders.

"Ryuko! Thank goodness you're all right! I heard that somebody from that terrorist group tried to infiltrate the Academy! Luckily nobody else was hurt, but the guy escaped before the Disciplinary Committee could do anything. Good thing Mr Mikisugi was there, he said that he patched you up."

I flinched inwardly when Mako called Dad's resistance faction a terrorist group, then I remembered that she'd been living in Honnouji since she was little and that was probably all she knew. Plus nobody knew that Dad was the leader.

"Yeah, I was really freaked out. I don't know why that creep tried to attack me though; hopefully, he doesn't come after me again."

Mataro began studying my face like a book, and out of nowhere, he began smirking at me like he had discovered a dirty secret.

"Hey, Mom told me that you were staying at your teacher's place... so are you guys, well, you know?" he winked at me and made a motion with his elbow like he was nudging me for emphasis.

I hoped I wasn't blushing and was prepared to thrash Mataro into the ground for that.

"Mataro!" Mako gasped, glaring at her brother angrily, "It's nothing like that! Mr. Mikisugi was Ryuko's dad's friend and he's helping her out, that's all!"

"Yeah, what she said!"

He didn't listen to either of us and began to run off, screaming, "Ryuko's got the hots for teacher!" and "Ryuko and teacher sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G!" at the top of his lungs. I buried my face in my hands, cringing at his immature taunts. Still, if the little brat could see it... I'd best be careful.

"Sorry about that, he has no manners." Mako flimsily apologized, hoping to diffuse the whole thing.

"Oh gee, I couldn't tell."

We walked to the tramway station and boarded it, and we reached the Academy at 8:20. It took us five minutes to reach our classroom, and we went through the usual routine that day. However, we were getting more homework than usual. I knew it was because of mid-terms. I'd be able to study today, but tomorrow, I had Kendo club practice after school.

I realized as we went through the day that what Mr. Mikisugi said had some truth in it. I used to despise maths, but now it seemed like the least of my problems. Biology and chemistry seemed to be only a matter of memorization, and working out all those reactions continuously seemed to make sure they were etched in my mind. All I had to do for history was remember all those names and dates, and of course, suck up to the Kiryuins in my answers. It was only Physics, English, and Japanese where I felt I'd have a problem. I'd have to get at least a 60 in those three subjects and score around the mid-'80s in the others. Then it would be likely that I could reach my target.

When the day ended, at six, I remembered that I had to go to Mr. Mikisugi's office and get the past question papers he wanted to give me.

Remember, go in, get it, and get out. No wasting time.

I was mildly ticked off, but I remembered that Senketsu was right to an extent. So I went to his office and found that his hair was in front and he was still wearing those thick glasses, which was something of a relief.

"Here, Matoi. Now remember, we never met today."

"Got it."

And without saying anything more, I caught up with Mako and we made our way on the tramway back to her house. I remembered that if I wore Senketsu to bed, there was a chance

that I'd have one of those drowning nightmares again, and I didn't want that. So I freshened up and wore the pyjamas Mako gave me. When I came out, Mako's mom had already prepared the usual, rice and her who-knows-what croquettes. The day was tiring, so I welcomed a bit of a break.

"So, Mataro, how was your day?" Mako's mom asked.

"Boring as hell. We had ANOTHER mock Evaluation test, this time it was in history. And you know what you need to get into Honnouji Academy? They want 80 PERCENT!"

"And what did you get?"

"I got a 75! And the teacher's like 'if this were a real Evaluation, you'd be stuck where you were for good, even five marks make a difference between luxury and squalor...' blah blah blah. I've heard all this crap before."

I couldn't help but pull a face at that, and Mako's mom didn't seem too thrilled about it either, as she was suddenly silent.

"And you two?"

"Mid-terms are coming up. They've swamped us with work."

"Yeah, but if we work hard, we can pass, right?"

"Pass? Don't you want to advance to One-Star? I mean, I think you can do that."

"You're overestimating me, Ryuko." Mako's voice was suddenly wavering and uneasy. I decided to change the topic, but Mataro managed to do so before I could.

"And we also got this," he pulled a book out of his schoolbag next to him, it was tattered and it was hard to make out the words, "Stupid little book about all the famous Kiryuins and all that crap. They want us to read this for independent study..."

I grabbed the book from Mataro's hands and flipped through it as I ate. I didn't care about any of the other people in there, but I went to the second to last chapter, which mentioned Ragyo. I didn't want to read all the details, so I just decided to read the introduction.

Ragyo Kiryuin (December 8, 2226 -)

A passionate innovator and REVOCS' most successful CEO to date, Ragyo Kiryuin changed the face of the Kiryuin Conglomerate with her ingenuity and effective management skills. Her eagerness to bring honour to her family name was visible from a young age. At age 14, she went under the knife, bringing her closer to perfection than ever before. At age 26, she appointed her husband, Soichirou Kiryuin, the inventor of the Kamui, as REVOCS' Head Tailor...

"Woah, Woah, Ragyo's husband invented the Kamui?"

"You didn't know? It's why Ragyo's the only one who has one... except for you of course. Did you really think Soichirou was going to give away his secret invention so easily? I don't know how your Dad ever got his hands on the blueprint, but he must have had guts. It's probably why they came after him."

Suddenly a thought came to me, what if Dad got his trade, and how to make Kamui... from the Kiryuins themselves? What if he stole Soichirou Kiryuin's work and took off with me? He had to have done it when I was a baby otherwise I would have remembered something. It would explain why he hated them so much and why he told me to stay away from them... they would have recognized me. Maybe that's why Satsuki hated me so much, my father ruined her father's life's work. I decided to ask Mr Mikisugi about it later, and I continued to read.

...and began the Hybrid Integration Programme, giving many young Hybrids an opportunity to join her cause. Her strong will and devotion to bettering humanity will be known for years to come.

"Jeez, it's like these people can do no wrong!"

"Oh, it gets worse. Read Lady Satsuki's chapter."

Satsuki Kiryuin (May 1, 2255 -)

As Ragyo's sole heir, Satsuki shows great promise and, under her mother's tutelage, has propelled Honnouji Academy to number one in the nation. Taking the reins as its president at age nine, Satsuki Kiryuin worked tirelessly to innovate the Academy from the inside out. Her excellent intuition and ability to gauge a student's potential allowed her to amass a close-knit group of associates, each from one of the Big Seven Families, to whom she gave top positions in her Student Council. After higher studies, she intends to follow in her mother's footsteps.

"Huh, Satsuki and I were born on the same day... weird."

"Really? That's the first thing you noticed about her? So what? Lots of babies were probably born on that particular day."

"It's not just that. If we're both the same age, why is she in 12th grade?"

"Double promotion. She was deemed too good for first grade. Or maybe it was some good old-fashioned nepotism..."

"Mataro, you mustn't talk so disparagingly about the Kiryuin family. Remember that they're the reason why you and your sister have an education. And remember, in the time before Life Fibres, humanity was in disarray. Did they teach you about the 21st Century yet?"

"We learned that in the turn of the millennium, we lived in a 'feelings focused' world where self-esteem was prioritized over progress or something like that. Things like the internet, housing, and luxury items were given out like candy to people. Our teachers said that made them entitled, but I think it was so cool! We could have had all kinds of stuff!"

I had to admit, Mataro was right. I wondered what it would have been like if everyone had access to the things that only Two and Three Stars had access to. But Mako's mom sighed and gave her son a couple more croquettes.

"Someday, when you're older, you'll understand. Remember that Mistress Ragyo is doing everything for our own good."

Mako was glaring daggers at her mother, but only for a second as she returned to her food.

"...although," Mako added somewhat angrily as she grabbed a few more croquettes from the bowl in front of her, "There were some pretty nasty rumours about Mistress Ragyo going around, but that was when we were kids and you'd be hard-pressed to find someone who remembers them, much less believes them."

My ears perked up when Mako mentioned rumours, maybe people were on to what Life Fibre clothing really did to you when you wore it.

"Mako," her mom stared at her cautiously, "Is this the kind of thing to discuss over the dinner table?"

"What kind of rumours?" I asked curiously as I stuffed a croquette into my mouth. Mako turned to me but didn't respond as she was still chewing her food. Once she finished, she continued.

"It was because of some tabloid story that was going around in the Three and Two Star Districts about ten years ago."

"Wait, if it came from a tabloid, why did Ragyo react so strongly to it? She could have just brushed it aside, right?"

"Because a lot of people left the Conglomerate when the story came out. It got so bad that Lady Satsuki had to get involved, even testify in court."

That didn't surprise me. I once heard people saying that big shots kids never really had normal childhoods. They were trained from day one to be miniature versions of their parents and conduct themselves as adults. I tried to imagine a seven-year-old Satsuki in one of her mother's suits, trotting around in high heels and a tablet, prattling about her mother's innocence to lawyers and judges in a high-pitched little girl's voice. She was probably just as unfeeling then as she was now.

I looked over at Mako's mom and dad. Mako's mom was chewing the inside of her mouth and looking down at the low table. Mako's dad was suddenly very thirsty and downed a few gulps of water from the pitcher. I didn't know if it was because they knew what it was about and weren't telling us, or if it was because they didn't want us talking about it at all. It could have been both.

"So what happened after that? Why does nobody remember or talk about the story anymore?"

"Mistress Ragyo worked really, really hard to erase all memory of it. After the story was declared false, she had all evidence that it even existed removed. If you try to search for it on the internet, you won't get any results."

"At least, that's what they say." Mako's mom added, there was a bit of apprehension in her voice.

In the back of my mind, I wondered how Mako knew about this, despite No Stars not having internet access. I guessed she must have heard about it from another One Star or something.

"Was it about life fibres?" I asked.

"If it was, then the people who left would have been normal REVOCS employees, but they weren't. It was mostly maids, tutors, and nannies who took off. So it was probably something about Mistress Ragyo's personal life."

I knew I should have just ignored it if it was just an internal family scandal, but I couldn't. Who would abandon their entire livelihood over a couple of whispers regarding Ragyo Kiryuin and her daughter? What about the Kiryuin family was deemed so atrocious, so dangerous that it would compel people to betray her?

The conversation was getting way too serious, and I think everyone else figured it out, so all the talking just died out and we all silently finished our food. I helped everyone else wash the dishes before getting started with homework. Mataro was flipping through the television channels, I didn't know why. There was nothing much to watch aside from news or documentaries. Then the doorbell rang, and I saw Mako's dad answer the door, talking to a post officer.

"Hey, Ryuko, there's a letter for you."

Huh? A letter for me? Nobody has ever written to me before, I could imagine, however, that the contents weren't good news. Sure enough, I opened the envelope and read its contents.

If you want to keep your place in the Kendo club, you're going to have to prove your worth. Tomorrow, at 7:30 before school starts, meet me in the dojo. I'll be waiting.

Look Before You Leap

"Wait for the signal..."

We crouch in the alleyway with bated breath, keeping a close eye on our target. No matter how many times we pulled this off, I'd always remember every time we did how I took things like this for granted. If I wanted ramen noodles I could have just asked the chefs to make it for me. But for these people, what Ataru liked to call "the rabble," three meals a day was a pretty big deal, and three meals a day in a one-star establishment, even more so.

Shinji nods and then turned his eyes to the small grey building and the people sitting at a counter, and he begins licking his lips as he eyed the bowls full of noodle soup. It was of Gold Star brand, I recall, one of the companies owned by my family. I shudder to think of what Mother, Father, or Ataru would say if they saw me aiding a street gang in stealing the very food our family produced. Well, it's no skin off my back. Ataru may be the model son, but I command respect in my own way.

"Wait for it..."

Goro and Kenta begin screaming profanities at each other right in front of the restaurant. Kenta kicks Goro in the ribs, Goro pulls a couple of punches, and sure enough everyone begins to try and break up their fighting, leaving the prize unguarded.

"Now!"

We sprint as fast as we can to the counter and grab two bowls. While running back, I look in the corner of my eye to see if Goro and Kenta are running back to us. Instead, they stop dead in their tracks, and so do all the onlookers. I see a couple of them even bowing.

Two men with perfectly straightened hair and chiselled faces dressed in full white tuxedos are walking right past them. Behind them is a girl who looks about nine or ten, but it's hard to figure out how old Hybrids are. Life Fibres slow down the aging process, so for all I know, she could be my age or even older. Her platinum blonde hair is curled and styled in twin pony tails; her ribbons match her dress and boots, bright pink. She has a satisfied smile on her face as she trots about the street with a pink parasol in her hand. She turns to the brawl in front of her and stops, her expression pensive. I figured out the moment I saw the two men guarding her that she was one of Mistress Ragyo's associates. It's kind of weird to see her so far from Honnouji, but I remember that the Kiryuins make trips across the country all the time.

"Oh my, oh my, what happened here?" she raises an eyebrow as she eyes Goro and Kenta, then reaches into her purse and points a scanner at both of them, "You there, I believe you're in the wrong district. This place isn't meant for the likes of you."

She places the scanner back into her purse and gets out a tablet, also bright pink. She looks at me and Shinji, and back to her tablet again.

"Robbery, disrupting public order, entering a mid-tier district without the corresponding uniform... well, well, it looks like you have been such naughty boys! These are serious offences!"

Something about her makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. It's her eyes, yeah, that's it. Her violet eyes are cold and lifeless, and her voice... I think her voice is even worse. She sounds cheery, like a No-Star child playing in the fields, yet eerily calm.

Goro's looking at me, I know what he wants me to do, but I don't know who this girl is. I've never seen her at any sort of gathering or conference. She's probably a new edition to Mistress Ragyo's inner circle. I have to bide my time before I can figure out just what to say to her.

"It looks like I'm going to have to teach you Colony dogs some respect..."

She's about to call Law Enforcement, but trails off when she sees Goro. She looks straight in his eyes, and he glares at her like she was his worst enemy.

The girl snaps her fingers.

"Lady Harime..."

"Tell everyone here to clear the premises. I want this street to be deserted within the next half hour, save for these four naughty boys of course."

The two guards in front of her get out their tablets and sure enough, messages begin to appear on the jumbotrons and an announcer's voice blares, telling anyone on that street to return to their homes or face punishment. And true to her word, in half an hour, the only ones in the street were us, the two guards, and her.

"Miss Harime, I request that you leave them be. They're with me." I request, imitating Ataru in the best way I can.

She chuckles, covering her mouth with her free hand as she does.

"Well golly gee, just who do you think you are?"

It makes sense that she doesn't recognize me, I wear No-Star clothes when I go around with the guys. I pull my hoodie down so she knows for sure I'm not lying.

"My name is Uzu Sanageyama, youngest son of the Sanageyama family. Now please, let my friends be, and we will give you no trouble."

"You're Ataru's younger brother? Well, that's quite hard to believe! Why would someone of such high standing choose to associate with these hooligans?"

"They are my companions, Miss Harime. Please let them go, they were starving-"

"So you're supporting criminals now? And if they want food, why don't they prove they're worthy of it?"

"Mistress Ragyo said that she believes in fairness and giving people what they deserve. I've been with these boys for about two years, and I can assure you that their jobs as garbage collectors won't even pay for half a day's meal. I felt for them and decided they needed something more for all they did."

"Oh, how adorable, look at you playing Robin Hood like that! Well, if you really believe in Mistress Ragyo so much, why do you side with him? You know that Mistress Ragyo can't stand turncoats..."

She points to Goro. I knew a couple of years ago; his parents were of higher standing but got on the bad side of a certain Three-Star family and were killed. He didn't want to tell me the full story then. I can see why now, betraying the Kiryuins was a big ugly deal. Yet, even after knowing all this... I can't hate Goro for what his parents did. Something inside Goro snaps when the girl talks to him. He charges at the girl in blind rage, she quickly jumps out of the way and he falls to the floor.

"Turncoats?! Is that what you people call him?!"

"Your father was supplying information about the Kiryuin family to the Anti-Uniform Guerrilla. I had no choice; it wasn't my fault that he went on the wrong path. "

"YOU KILLED HIM IN COLD BLOOD!"

Goro tries to attack her again, but Shinji and Kenta run to his side and grab both his arms, restraining him.

"Hey, buddy, let her go. She's a Hybrid, not worth it." Shinji looks at me awkwardly again, expecting me to talk our way out of this.

"Ms. Harime, I assure you, this won't happen again. If you wish, I'll step aside and go back to doing my duty. Just leave them be."

The girl smiles at me innocently and waves her hand nonchalantly.

"Okay then, I'll leave your friends alone!"

Before I can blink she throws something at me, I swerve to the left, thinking she's aiming for me. It takes about a second, a second too late, to realize she isn't. And now my friend was staring at the open sky with lifeless eyes and a knife jutting out from his forehead, and Shinji and Kenta are staring in shock at his corpse.

"GORO!"

I run to him as fast as I can but all of a sudden, the girl, Harime rushes at me faster than any human can. I figure since people like us wear three-star clothes on a regular basis, I can put up a fight against her. I manage to dodge a laser beam from the gun she has on her before it can burn a hole through my chest. Then I get out the sword I'm carrying and hold it out in front of her. I turn to my left and right to see if the rest of the guys are with me, they're running away back to the base. I don't blame them.

I run to attack her, but to no avail. She's behind me the next second, and this time she doesn't miss. I cry out in pain from the burn in my left shoulder. She just laughs at me and shoots at me again. I'm kneeling on the floor, shielding the burns on my left arm.

"My parents will tell Mistress Ragyo about this! They'll make sure you pay!"

"...that won't be necessary."

I hear another voice behind me and turn around cautiously. Her icy blue eyes and harsh expression frighten me, but not in the same way that Harime does. I don't know whether to be relieved or frightened to be honest.

"You were supposed to be at the station five minutes ago. Mistress Ragyo will be furious, and you don't want to disappoint her, don't you?"

She glares daggers at Harime and clenches her fists.

"Do you take me for an ignoramus, Harime? I have come here for a purpose, and if I explain this to my mother, she will understand."

She giggles and points a finger in the air and shakes it, smiling at Lady Satsuki like how Ataru used to when he would insult me.

"Oh my good golly gosh, aren't you becoming rebellious! Wait until I tell Mistress Ragyo what a naughty girl you are for not following her instructions! And here I thought you were trying to be a dutiful daughter..."

"How many times have I told you, don't talk about me like you know me! And look at you; weren't YOU supposed to be joining my mother at the station with her documents ten minutes ago? Wouldn't Mother be more likely to lash out at you, her most trusted right hand, for failing her in her time of need and choosing to waste your time with the rabble?"

Harime freezes and blinks, once, twice. Then she sighs guiltily.

"Can't argue with that I guess... you're always on top of things, Lady Satsuki," then she snaps her fingers and gestures to the guards behind her, "Come on, let's get out of here."

She and her guards leave us behind, but Harime turns to Lady Satsuki and smiles smugly at her and waves as she trots about cheerfully, like she never killed somebody without hesitation. Lady Satsuki turns to Goro's body and frowns, then turns to me and stares at me like a scientist assessing a test subject.

"Not everyone can dodge a Mach 2 laser you know, and even fewer can last as long as you did against her." I'd normally be ecstatic on hearing this, but now her praise feels hollow.

She reaches for the sheath by her side and gets her sword Bakuzan out, I've heard quite a bit about it and know it's a family heirloom, but this is the first time I'm seeing it in person.

"Go on, come at me. I want to make sure that your earlier performance wasn't a fluke."

I hesitate, I don't want to attack her and risk getting in even more trouble.

"Very well, if you don't want to, then your filthy rat of a friend died for nothing."

She wants to trigger me, I know it, and it works. I charge at her, aiming for her ribs, but she blocks me with ease.

"Blindly rushing in never works..."

She pushes me backward and I almost fall, but I stand my ground.

"...but you're quick, and strong, I'll give you that."

I stop for a second and try to find an opening in her stance. I realize that trying to attack head on isn't going to work, so I come up with a strategy that I've used before. I sheathe my sword and run through the alley. I know this part of Kyoto's One-Star District quite well, and I know just the detour to take so that I'm right behind her. I imagine she's probably staring around in confusion or assumed that I'm a coward and gave up, and then when she least expects it...

But when I find her again, her back is still turned.

"Did you really think you could sneak up on me, Sanageyama?"

She stabs me in the stomach with the hilt of her sword, I cry out in pain and kneel on the ground. My head's spinning and I feel nauseous.

"...If you transfer to Honnouji Academy next term, I might have a use for you."

...

"Did you really think you could sneak up on me, Sanageyama?"

I tried to enter the Student Council room quietly, but Lady Satsuki was as sharp as always.

"I guess some things never change, do they?"

She turns her chair around so she can see me, she was wearing that Ten-Star uniform, or Kamui as she liked to call it. As usual, she had a cup of tea and a saucer in her hand, and sighed before taking a sip.

"I know why you're here. You want a chance to prove yourself."

"Ogure failed, but I just might be able to succeed."

"Do you honestly think that just because you have sharp eyes you'll be able to find her Nexus Threads?"

"I know better than that, but you said Inumuta's almost done with the Nexus Goggles. If he could just give them to me-"

"It's a prototype, and besides, it's nothing more than a shoddy substitute for an actual Hybrid or COVER's eyes."

"If I may be so bold-"

"Out with it."

"You're a Hybrid, aren't you? Well, you're yet to be one at least. Why don't you just activate your internal Life Fibres yourself?"

Lady Satsuki suddenly became deathly quiet; I knew this either meant she was furious or that she was deep in thought.

"The activation of one's internal Life Fibres is a risky endeavour. My mother feels that it would be wise to not carry out this process until she can figure out how to do so without injuring or killing me. Until that day, I have to rely on you people and Inumuta's toys to carry out my plans."

Nobody ever told me why Lady Satsuki was still human in spite of going under the knife, or how to become a Hybrid with dormant Life Fibres inside you. All I could do was guess.

"Then give me the Nexus Goggles. You know me; you know what I'm capable of. I'm Matoi's club president and I know how she operates. I can't lose."

"...very well. But if you fail me, don't ever think for a second that I didn't warn you about how stubborn you are."

"And if I do succeed, you'll treat me to a cup of Soroi's famous tea."

"Done."

I find this flesh-being's actions to be rather suspicious, Ryuko. He communicates with you via, as you said, obsolete methods and challenges you to a duel at a time when the likelihood of being spotted is slim.

Suspicious is right, but he's going to kick me out of the Kendo club if I don't show up and give him a good fight.

Do you not recall what he said when you first came to this place?

I've gotten stronger since then, maybe I do have a chance, at least, a chance to not go down pathetically.

I walked over to the corner of the dojo and picked up a wooden practice sword from one of the racks. I remembered how shocked I was when I first came here. The wooden floor was so clean and shiny that it would sometimes squeak when you walked on it, the walls were a blinding white and the paint never peeled, the big screen on the right wall was turned off

now, but when we had practice all our records would flash across it and be instantly updated when we won or lost a new fight. It seemed like nothing to the people here, but back in the colony, the latest technology was an LCD TV that worked probably once in a blue moon to play propaganda, and buildings in good condition didn't even exist.

"You know what the problem with them folks in the cities is? All the fancy gadgets and gizmos they've got, their Life Fibres, take 'em away from them and it's like cutting off their arms and legs. Ask them city folk to strip down and fight like us, and they're powerless."

The boxer dude and the tennis girl's aghast faces when I managed to slice their uniforms in two had pretty much confirmed what Yato told me all those years ago. But then I remembered Maiko and how different her uniform was from those guys, how lightning fast she was and how she could vanish from sight instantly. Someone like her, someone who proved to be strong even while disguised as a No-Star... I didn't think the Big Seven were capable of getting that cocky.

And sure enough, Uzu walked into the dojo right that second, I knew something was up when I saw he was wearing pink tinted, square glasses with a toggle on one of the rims. I tried not to chuckle at how ridiculous they looked.

The eyewear that flesh being possesses is no laughing matter. Remember what that man said.

I almost froze in place and hoped that those glasses, whatever they were, weren't for what I thought they were for. I went over in my head various ways I could stay out of his line of sight, how to toy with him, how to confuse him so he doesn't focus on me...

"So you showed up. Well, I'm impressed."

He smirked at me and took a few steps closer, his hands were folded.

"Oh come on, put that thing away. When I said I wanted to fight you, I meant the real deal."

I walked back to the racks and put the kendo sword back, and then I returned to my original spot and got my scissor blade out of my pocket.

"What, you want to see the world with rose tinted lens?"

He frowned at me; I didn't think he appreciated my little jab.

"Very funny. Now are you going to focus on my outfit, or on actually..."

He took a few strides towards me and got out a real sword, he swung it in my direction and I jumped out of the way. If he wanted to find my Nexus thread, I couldn't stay in one place for too long.

"...trying to land a hit on me?"

I turned my syringe glove with a flourish and transformed, knowing that Senketsu would give me an edge. I made a sharp left turn and swerved around him, hoping to attack him from behind, but he blocked me in a fraction of a second.

"Pathetic."

I managed to push his sword away and did a forward roll, and managed to narrowly escape his sword a second time in the process. When I turned around, Uzu was in front of me again and was aiming for my neck, I blocked him again just in time. I tried to make a left, but he swiped his sword under my feet, tripping me over and making cuts in my heels and soles. While I was face down on the floor, he walked to me and stepped on my back.

"Sometimes a club president can learn from their subordinates, you know."

I managed to push myself up, knocking him over in the process, and I started to run behind him, making sure to change my position every few seconds.

Give me a hand here, will you?

You do realize I lack hands, do you?

Help me out!

My vision went red and I knew that Uzu was clever from what I saw. His dark green shirt had a Nexus thread in his right sleeve, his jacket had one in his left, and his pants had one in the right leg. I saw pink life fibres curled around the side of those funny glasses of his, but I didn't know if they were nexus threads or not. He knew if I wanted to really beat him, I had to technically deal with four uniforms rather than one.

Ignore the others, go for his eyewear. He can't kill you without it.

Uzu turned to face me and ran in my direction, I sprinted away as fast as I could.

But in order to do that... I have to be near him, and if I am...

He was catching up to me, at this rate he was probably using those fancy glasses of his. At this point I was starting to fear for my life.

Hmm... worry not. The eyewear can only pinpoint possible Nexus Thread locations; it is an imperfect imitation of our capabilities, but nonetheless, a valiant attempt.

But this means he still has a chance of killing me!

...point.

He tried to stab me in the neck; I blocked his sword in a flash, pushed him away, and jumped back about half a metre. Then he tried going for my stomach... where I knew my Nexus Thread was, before he could, I ducked and did a forward roll to the side. I realized then that Uzu's swordplay wasn't his best skill. I mean, sure, he was good, but Satsuki was a lot stronger than him. He was relying on something else entirely.

...he's overconfident. He thinks that he can beat me with observation alone.

Ryuko, do you recall in one of your battles, you carefully tore a piece of me to use against your opponent?

Oh yeah, against the tennis girl... wait, that's it!

I jumped high into the air and dodged another attack aiming for my midsection and cut a few strings from Senketsu's top half, then threw the strings right in his face so they would cover those glasses of his, and now he was completely blinded. He took a few steps back and frowned, but didn't seem to react beyond sputtering in confusion.

NOW!

I focused on the threads coiling around his glasses, then I ran towards him and cut right through them. His glasses collapsed in a heap on the floor. Uzu's eyes were wide, but he was smirking.

"...Well, that's one out of four. I admit my intention wasn't to go all out on you, it would be a shame if I did though, really. I guess... I guess this means you really do have potential."

He folded his hands and walked to the exit, his back turned to me.

"Hey, if you score well in your mid-terms, consider running for vice president of the kendo club... I can really grill you then."

To be honest, I didn't know whether to be thrilled or suspicious. He seemed to have taken his loss a bit too well. Senketsu said his glasses could find possible locations of my Nexus Threads. I hoped that he would still be uncertain about his findings.

"I narrowed it down to three possible areas. Her Nexus Thread is either in her neck, her navel, or her upper thighs, all areas where her Internal Life Fibres are most concentrated."

Lady Satsuki rolled her eyes at me and sighed.

"...but she exploited your weakness."

I cringed. I had to admit, Matoi was getting pretty strong, fast. In fact, I hadn't seen anyone as strong as her in a long time. I actually didn't want to kill her because, as childish as it seemed, fighting her was entertaining regardless of outcome.

"Sanageyama, have you ever considered that relying solely on one sense is unwise?"

"Of course."

"Then I hope you will take pains to remedy this deficiency of yours."

"I will."

Lady Satsuki opened the surveillance cameras and watched the footage of our fight, her hand resting on her chin.

"...you find her amusing, don't you?"

"Well-"

"It won't be so amusing if she becomes strong enough to fight you for real. Don't get in over your head; remember where your loyalties lie. And should you forget... I shall know."

Then Lady Satsuki did something I didn't expect. She poured an extra cup of tea and placed it on the side table next to her, and gestured to it.

"However... I'm not the sort of person who breaks their promises. Come here; sit with me for a while."

I nodded and took a seat next to her, and gingerly held the small plate and cup in my hands. I took a sip, wondering what was it about the stuff that made Lady Satsuki so addicted to it.

"This is..."

"What?"

"...It's pure black tea. No sugar, no milk... just... bitter."

She chuckled mirthlessly, and looked out the window, as though remembering something.

"Compared to some other bitter things... this is nothing."

I had a feeling Lady Satsuki said more than she intended.

Advancement

"I already told you, Matoi. Ishin never told me where he got his trade from, I tried to ask him and he would dodge the subject every time." Mr. Mikisugi sighed as he was sorting out the model test papers on his desk in the staff room, his back turned. I shifted a little to the left and craned my neck to see if my paper was in that pile, it wasn't. I hoped I had done well though, the clock was ticking and there was only one week left. Eventually I got bored of searching for my paper and lay down on the couch, stretching my legs and placing my hands behind my head.

"But doesn't it make sense? I mean, Dad didn't want to tell you about it and Satsuki's dad was the one who came up with the idea for the Kamui in the first place. And Dad's last words were that he was sorry for not telling me the truth, whatever it was. He probably used to serve Ragyo in the past."

Eventually Mr. Mikisugi finished his work and moved over to the couch to sit next to me, I bent my legs to give him space. He leaned back against the couch and folded his hands.

"Well... come to think of it, you are right that your little theory explains quite a bit, but it is just a theory. However, you can find out for yourself whether it's true or not if you can climb up in the ranks."

I sat up and began looking down at my feet. Even if I did manage to become a One-Star... was it going to be all that it was cracked up to be? Would I just be provoking Satsuki even more?

"Yeah, yeah. I know. Uzu's been working me like a dog since the whole Nexus goggles incident. Is any of this going to get better if I become a One-Star? Or am I going to have even more problems on my hands?"

"Well, obviously you're going to have better accommodations and food, and you're going to get a prototype tablet and internet access. However... as *Mistress Ragyo* says..." I noted his sarcastic use of the honorific.

"Anyone can live the high life, provided they work for it. You reap what you sow, and we provide the people with what we feel they deserve." We chimed in unison; I tilted my head so my nose was high in the air and sneered like she did, and made an effort to imitate the arrogant tone and cadence in her voice that I hadn't heard from anyone else. Mr. Mikisugi raised his eyebrow afterwards and blinked twice, I didn't know why.

"...so you'll have to put in more effort if you want to keep your improved lifestyle, and help the Anti-Uniform Guerrilla achieve our goal of course."

Help the Anti-Uniform Guerrilla achieve its goal...

Suddenly I felt my stomach sink and I stared at my knees with a dejected expression. I wondered why it didn't strike me before, but Dad's end goal basically amounted to

overthrowing our current government. Dad died before he could do it... so he passed his ambitions down to me. Dad probably wished he could keep me away from all this, but he knew that I couldn't run forever. And if I was already a part of the Guerrilla, I'd probably have to appear before them and make cheesy speeches about how we're going to create a new society without Life Fibres. Even worse, I'd probably have to lead them, even create battle strategies. And eventually I'd be led to a confrontation with Ragyo Kiryuin herself...

I had never been a leader in my life. Not with the Black Stripes, or the Blue Squares, and most certainly not at school. I knew how to pick pockets, how to kill someone quickly, how to get away from goons, and how to hold my own in a fist fight... but did I have the potential to lead?

From my peripheral vision I saw that Mr. Mikisugi was looking at me like he felt sorry for me, his eyes were soft and he was frowning.

"...come here."

He held out an arm for me, I didn't hesitate for a second. I threw my arms around him and buried my face in his chest, he shifted me a bit so that I was sitting in his lap, and one arm was around my waist while the other was stroking my hair.

"I understand. Your father's dead, you're working your hardest to find out why, and you're a major player in a budding revolution. It's a lot of pressure to put on a teenage girl, but you're handling it quite gracefully, you know? Don't be afraid to say it, talk to me if you have any concerns."

The fact that he could read my thoughts so well would never cease to amaze me, but I pushed that aside for now. I wanted to forget about Satsuki, about mid-terms, about Dad, about his stupid revolution, about pretty much everything. As stupid as it sounded, I wanted to stay in his arms and never let go.

Time waits for no one, you know. You will have to leave your current position eventually.

And I also wanted to forget Senketsu and his stubbornness.

Shut up.

I clung to the collar of his shirt and kissed him, a few seconds later I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him over so that we were lying down with him on top of me. He stopped and placed a hand on my cheek; I made a whining sound and frowned.

"Hey, hey, easy..."

It also struck me then that if I made it to One-Star, Mr. Mikisugi would no longer be teaching me. Would I still be able to come to him in case I needed anything? In case we wanted to see each other?

"If I... if I transfer... will I still be able to see you again?" I pulled him close to me, my arms around his shoulders; I could feel tears in my eyes.

"Oh, Matoi... "He moved to the left side, but still didn't let go of me, "Of course, but you'll have to be careful. A One-Star student coming down here would look out of place..."

"Don't call me that." I half pleaded, half whined.

"Pardon?"

"Call me *Ryuko*. Please."

He was silent for a minute and then sighed.

"Only when we're alone, you hear?"

I kissed his cheek and began nibbling at his neck, but he stopped me.

"Don't. If you leave a mark people will wonder."

"You're wearing a collared shirt. Nobody's gonna see."

"Ryuko?"

"Yeah?" I smiled.

"You're forgetting the mission. It would be best if you left now."

I sat up quickly and grabbed my bag near the couch. I looked in a hand mirror on the desk, my hair was wild and fanned out and my face was bright red.

"Oh great..." I grumbled as I tried to finger comb my hair to make it look respectable, "I look like I just had sex."

"...Is that what you were hoping for, Ryuko?" he asked me as he smirked, I blushed even more.

"One track mind I see..."

I walked out of the room, about to leave the Academy and make my way to the tramway station, but I could only just barely leave the corridor before I was greeted a pair of suspicious eyes, and their owner frowning with her hands on her hips.

"M-Mako?!" I jumped back when I saw her, "You were supposed to have left by now!"

"I was waiting for you, Ryuko. I was worried at first but... I guessed that you were talking to Mr. Mikisugi about something... oh well. It's okay. Now come on, let's go home, we've got lots of work to do!"

Mako tried to be her usual perky self, but I could tell she was hiding something. On the way back to her house, she and I would normally talk about stuff like what a classmate did, what we learned, what everyone had for lunch, just trivial stuff. Today however, she was

completely silent. She would only keep looking at me from the corner of her eye on occasion and stare out into the open lost in thought.

The exuberant one knows more than she appears, it is evident. Perhaps she has discovered your weakness for that man. I do not fault her for her scorn towards it.

I hope that's not the case.

There is also more she refuses to tell you, you know. Have you not noticed? You are wary of the owner of the other Kamui, you are wary of those who try to fight you, but you do not notice that there may be a threat right under your nose.

I tried to contain my anger when Senketsu spoke about Mako that way.

Wh-what the hell?! Mako's not like that you moron! She's too stupid to be considered a threat!

You are angry towards me? I am only stating a fact. And also, underestimating those around you is unwise. It is unclear if she really is malicious, but it seems her and her family have many secrets. It may be beneficial that you will be required to change residence should you perform well in your examinations. I advise you don't meddle with them any more than you are now.

We reached before Senketsu could say anything more. I couldn't wait to change and shut him up. When I made it back to Mako's house, I immediately did just that. Then I got out all my books and model test papers, shortly after I did, Mako came into the room with water and rice balls, which she placed on the floor near us.

"Okay then! Let's get started!"

We decided to study Physics and Chemistry first, as they would be our last exams and it would be better to get it over with now. We went through all the problems and reactions that we had done over the past few months, worked out our homework sums again, and did model test papers, checking each other's answers.

"Hey, Ryuko... do you really think you're gonna advance to One-Star?" Mako looked up from her chemistry textbook, twirling her pen in her hand. Why was Mako asking me that? Did she think I was getting cocky?

"I have to. I have no other choice if I wanna know who killed Dad."

"I've... I've actually heard that being a One-Star isn't as cracked up as they say. I mean, if you change your mind..."

She isn't inquiring for your genuine welfare; she wants you to drop your ambitions. Do not fall for it.

Mako... wants me to fail? But...

I will not say that I warned you, but I did.

"I'm sorry but I can't do that. And besides, don't you want your family to live a better life? Don't you want to live a better life?"

Mako sighed and returned to the sum she was working on.

"Eh, forget I said anything. Now come on and turn to page 66, I have a doubt in this reaction here..."

I moved over to her and looked at the problem in question. I decided to forget Mako's odd behaviour and just concentrate on the matter at hand: mid-term exams.

I didn't know if I would succeed, but I had no choice. I had to try.

...

"Today is quite an important occasion. It is a day when all students of Honnouji Academy are recognized for their performance or lack thereof, and accordingly, are given what we feel they deserve. Today, students, you will either reap the benefits of your tireless work and ambition, or suffer the consequences of laziness and stupidity. Now, let us begin."

October 1st had come. We had finished our English and Japanese exams yesterday, and today was the day, the Transfer Ceremony. All of the One and No-Star students were waiting with bated breath in the auditorium, eyes fixated on the screen as Gamagoori read out our marks when they appeared. He started out with the No-Stars, and made his way up from the 9th graders, then the 10th graders, and then us, all in alphabetical order by last name. I knew that Mako and I would come somewhere near to each other, but we were close to the end of the name list. So we had to wait for long. Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity, we were next.

"Ryuko Matoi."

I swallowed thickly, my heart was pounding in my throat, my head was throbbing, and my legs were shaking. I crossed my fingers and hoped for good results.

7.0, 7.0, 7.0...

Repeating your desired outcome over and over will not make it happen, Ryuko.

Stop being such a pessimist and watch.

And then my marks came on to the screen:

English: 60/100

Japanese: 75/100

History and Geography: 90/100

Mathematics: 86/100

Biology: 72/100

Chemistry: 80/100

Physics: 80/100

Extracurricular: Kendo Club, Rating: A

Cumulative GPA: 7.75

I couldn't stop myself from grinning from ear to ear, 7.7! That was higher than I had ever hoped for! I'd be living in a flat with washing machines, clean bathrooms, warm beds, and internet access! I'd get a tablet of my own! I'd be more respected in the Kendo club! And most importantly I'd be closer to finding the scumbag who killed Dad!

"Congratulations. From next week, you will advance to the rank of One-Star. Take your position seriously."

I was a One-Star! After so much work I finally made it! Mako would have made it as well, and we'd still be able to study together! I wanted to run to her with the good news and celebrate all our hard work afterwards, but I had to wait, I needed to know what her marks were first.

"Mako Mankanshoku."

I looked at Mako, who was sitting two rows in front of me; I couldn't tell what she was thinking at that moment.

English: 65/100

Japanese: 60/100

History and Geography: 62/100

Mathematics: 67/100

Biology: 63/100

Chemistry: 67/100

Physics: 68/100

Cumulative GPA: 6.45

"Unfortunately you will maintain your current rank of No-Star. Don't disappoint in the future."

I furrowed my brows, Mako and I studied together, and she seemed to have gotten a hang of everything back at her house... how come she got the marks she did? She was probably

disappointed at this, but there was also our semester exam, wasn't there? I hoped she'd get better by then.

After the ceremony finished, all the new One-Stars and Two-Stars were asked to go up to the podium to where the blue-haired guy from the testing room was standing, and he handed out our transfer certificates. I went back to Mako afterwards, I didn't know if I'd be rubbing my marks in her face or not. I noticed her face was blank. She wasn't happy, she wasn't sad, she was just there. She didn't even congratulate me on a job well done.

"Ryuko... will you still visit even though you're..."

"Of course I will."

Mako sighed and looked at her feet, she seemed disappointed.

"That's... good."

She looked away from me. Something about her tone didn't feel right, it seemed as though she wasn't satisfied with my answer and thought I was lying.

"Mako...? Mako are you okay?" I asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm fine," she pushed my hand away, her back was turned, "I just need a bit of time to accept this."

"I... I don't get it."

Mako turned to face me, she was frowning and her hands were clenched into fists. If I didn't know better I'd say she was... angry.

"Your internal Life Fibres are what got you this far, you know. Without them you'd have gotten the same marks as me. Keep relying on them and you're gonna lose yourself." Her tone was scathing, I never heard her sound like that before.

The worst part was what she said... her too, huh? I could hear everyone else who told me that, I winced at the uncomfortable flashbacks.

"Oh, the Hybrid?! Ha! She thinks she's so great because those aliens in her head give her all the answers!"

"Why don't you just join REVOCS and leave us all alone?! Someone like you who uses Life Fibres for your own stupid self, you'd fit right in!"

"Matoi, I had to fail you, as a Hybrid you have an unfair advantage over everyone else here. I can't allow you to sail ahead of those who actually work for their marks."

"What the hell?! But I DID work for my marks you idiot! Do you dumbasses think that my internal Life Fibres just know everything and write the test for me?! It doesn't work like that!"

"Shut your mouth you little brat! You know what? Twenty lashings is too good for you! I'll give you a hundred!"

But I held my ground; I wasn't cruel enough to beat Mako into a bloody pulp.

"Don't tell me you're jealous." I snarled with gritted teeth.

That seemed to send Mako into a rage, and unexpectedly, she slapped me. I cried out at the pain.

"Jealous?! Jealous?! Who the hell do you take me for?! I'm not like- I'm not like SOME people who get on their high horse just because they scored well in some lousy test, and suddenly they think they're the kings of the world and that they can take on anything!"

I covered the red bruise on my cheek with my hand; I held back the urge to cry.

"M-Mako, why?"

"I know! I know you think I'm stupid, too stupid to do anything right. I know you're just gonna take it through one ear and push it out the other but listen: the higher you climb, the more you're gonna forget. In fact, you've already forgotten a bunch of things now."

"Don't lose your way..." exactly as Dad would tell me. I also remembered what Senketsu said, and now I was starting to wonder...

"Mako...? Is... is there something you're not telling me?"

She didn't answer me; she just scoffed at me and folded her hands.

"Go. Go and be happy. Go wave your certificate around and leave me in the dust."

Pride

"I'm sorry, Ryuko. I said some really nasty things to you during the Transfer Ceremony. I was upset and didn't know what I was thinking... can you forgive me?"

It's the first time Mako had spoken to me since last week. That week after the Ceremony could be accurately described as hell, even more so than mid-terms. Aside from Mako giving me the cold shoulder, I had to fill out at least ten papers just to get a bank account and small apartment on the outskirts of the One-Star district.

I feel relieved when I hear her speak, and turn around to face her cot. She isn't looking at me though, she's staring at the ceiling.

"Don't beat yourself up over it. We all get a little out of control at times."

I feel a cramp in my leg and stretch it, almost kicking Guts off the cot. I don't know how much dogs understand, but I think he knows I'm going away. The entire day he was following me, and he didn't beg anyone for table food like he usually does.

"You'll visit, right? I mean, you specifically requested for an apartment close to the No-Star district didn't you?"

It's the last day before I move. I don't have many things to pack. A bag of toiletries, my scissor blade, three pairs of no-star clothes, seven pairs of undergarments, and all my schoolbooks are all in my rucksack and kept near Mako's front door in an orderly fashion, plus the three sacks of cash that Dad left for me in a safe at his lab kept in a laundry bag to disguise them. I won't even be needing my schoolbooks anymore, I realize. Once I get my own tablet I'll take photos of all my portions and they'll be stored in it.

"Of course I'll visit. It's gonna be boring as hell living all alone."

It's the truth. Even though I'm so used to it, I don't want to go back to being alone. Having nothing but dingy grey walls and moth-ridden beds to keep me company is going to be no different from what I'm going to now.

"Hey, Ryuko, I wanted to ask you this before, but never got the chance."

"What?"

"You've told me about your dad before, about how he sent you to boarding school when you were six and how he was too absorbed with his work to look after you..."

I never told her everything though. It's not that I feel like my life in the colony is something I should be ashamed of, it's that talking about it and even thinking about it makes me feel miserable.

"Yeah, but... but somehow I can't entirely hate him for it. And Dad's last words were that he was sorry he couldn't tell me the truth. I want to know what that truth is. I want to know why my life has been the hell that it was."

"...so, you know at least something about your dad. Have you... have you ever wondered about your mom?"

I feel like someone punched me in the gut. I used to imagine what my mom would be like as a kid. Sometimes I'd have dreams of coming home to a nice house with a woman all in white at the front door, holding her arms out for me. Before I was sent to boarding school I used to beg Dad to tell me about her whenever I got the chance, and every time I asked about it he'd either be sad or angry. At some point in my life, I decided to forget I ever had a mother.

"...Dad never liked to talk about her. All he ever told me was that shortly after I was born, she died, and that it was the Life Fibres that killed her."

"Why would he say such a thing? Life Fibres can't kill you... well, not really..."

I forget for a moment that Mako, like most people, doesn't know what Life Fibres do to people when they wear them.

"So Ryuko... that means you haven't had a real family, right? So I guess, after living with us, you have an idea of what that's like now, right?"

It's then when I realize that Mako's right. I'm going to miss them, their entire family, even the little brat Mataro.

"Yeah..." I try my hardest not to cry.

"I'm gonna miss you Ryuko."

Damn, Mako and I had been living together long enough for her to read my mind.

"...me too."

...

Everything was so orderly and clean. I had never seen anything like it.

Unlike the No-Star district where each building was diverse and you knew your house when you saw it, every apartment complex in the One-Star district looked exactly the same, like little white boxes with black lids stacked on top of each other, all named after precious metals so you could identify yours. The roads were made of concrete instead of dirt, the street lamps were bright white instead of a dingy yellow, and everyone was neatly groomed and civil and wore actual clothing rather than rags, but also curt. Even the cabs were clean, the seats were plush leather and the entire car shined brightly in the sun.

Yes, Ryuko. It is indeed better that you will now be living in this area. This environment is not only safer but offers more scope to be productive.

And it's awesome!

I knew I was acting like a small child, but I didn't care. I had been waiting for this day for so long.

"Stop pressing your face against the glass, girl. I sent the cab for cleaning two days ago."

I reluctantly complied but still continued to gaze out the window, awestruck by my new home. After an indeterminate period of time, we stopped, and I got down at Ruby, the apartment complex I was supposed to stay in. I paid the fare to the cab driver and he drove off. I took the card key out of my pocket; it said my room was 3G. I walked into the main door and took the lift, inserted the key into the slot on the side of the door, and it opened. I thought I couldn't get any more amazed, I was wrong.

The cream coloured paint on the walls was brand new, the wood floors squeaked when I walked on them. It was smaller than Dad's lab, but there were more rooms than I had ever seen in a house. There was an actual kitchen, with sinks, a countertop, a microwave, a rice cooker, a gas stove, an oven, and everything instead of just a little hot plate and a few cutting boards in the middle of the dining room as I had seen in Mako's house. The living room slash dining room had enough space to keep a table, a T.V, and sofas, and was actually separate from the kitchen. There two bathrooms, a small one near the living room, and a bigger one that was right next to my room. The small bathroom had white tiles so shiny my eyes hurt, the sink was pristine without a single hair or insect in it, the toilet had a couple of buttons on the side instead of a lever. There was even a small cabinet above the sink to keep all my stuff. The bigger bathroom right next to my room was just the same, except instead of a bucket and mug, there was an actual tub with a shower handle, and the water coming from it was crystal clear instead of a slight brown. There was a washing machine room next to the small bathroom, and a washer and dryer were already there. My room was the best part, and it didn't even have any furniture in it yet. It was the biggest room in the flat, with two huge windows so I could see everything that was going on outside.

I knew that I had a lot of work to do today. I had to go to the bank to get my debit card, and then shopping complex at the heart of the district and get myself a tablet and furniture for this place and I'd have to make sure it was placed properly, but I was so happy and excited that I didn't care about all the work. I couldn't wait to see how this place would look once I was done with it. I didn't waste any time, I grabbed the map of the One-Star district I had in my bag, the laundry bag full of cash and my bag full of my books and ran as fast as I could to the bus stop. Even the buses here were clean, unlike the tramway, but were quiet and mostly filled with people in formal clothes checking their tablets and whispering to each other. I never even had to worry about being robbed.

The bank was a small white building with people running about, carrying out transactions on tablets and monitors. It took a few hours to get it done, but I did it, all the money I had in the bag was now deposited in my account and I never had to carry cash again. I couldn't wait to get to the shopping complex and imagined it would be even better.

It was. There was a glass roof and in the centre there was a huge fountain and flowers and plants of all kinds surrounding it. There were shops selling all sorts of things like furniture,

electronics, clothes, food, health products, and bags lined up next to each other and people excitedly making their purchases.

Now remember, spend conservatively and only on items which will be of use.

First things first, I ran to the furniture shop. There were two floors with all kinds of stuff and it was so hard to decide what I wanted. For the kitchen slash dining room I chose a wooden table with four chairs and a light pink sofa. I bought a small caddy to keep my bathing stuff in the bathroom and some bath towels, and for my room I decided to go all out. I chose a single bed with drawers at the bottom painted red, and a red and white bedsheet and pillow cover set to match. Along with it I got two white night tables with drawers and a long rectangular white desk. For curtains, I went with plain light pink. Lastly I got a wall shelf set, a white dressing table, and a white and pink armoire. All the furniture would be delivered to my apartment within two hours.

Next I got myself a tablet; it was just like the ones we got on No-Late Day except I could choose the colour and size. I chose a small red one. At the electronics shop there was also a place where I could scan all my books to be saved into the tablet. I took care of that as soon as I could. At the health shop I was overwhelmed with what they had. Soaps, shampoos, conditioners, and toothpastes all with flavours and scents I hadn't heard of until now, and the selection of food at the grocery store was even wider. I noticed my rucksack looked gross and worn out so I decided to get myself a new bag, a pretty looking grey and white striped bag with two pockets in front. I also bought myself some new clothes, One-Star clothes, to replace the No-Star clothes I had before.

It was about 9:00 PM when all the work was finished, and I was so fried I barely had the energy to make myself a dinner of instant beef noodles, and I knew that I'd have to start school again tomorrow, but that seemed to be in the back of my mind now. I could see why people were willing to work so hard and push others down, if their reward for doing so was this.

I had finished bathing and getting ready for bed. I noticed there was something different about the One-Star water or something because I looked different. My normally disheveled and cowlick ridden hair, while still uneven, was tamed and soft from the conditioner, and my face looked brighter, and instead of Mako's hand me down nightclothes, I was wearing a pink t-shirt with a pocket and polka dotted pants. Was I starting to look... richer, or was I just seeing things? I smiled to myself, if Satsuki could see me now... she'd most likely be furious.

I fell asleep in my new bed in my new house, tired, yet happy.

When I was eight years old, Takahashi, the family doctor diagnosed me with insomnia and remarked how strange it was for someone so young to have it. He prescribed me some sleeping pills and told me to take chamomile tea every night. Mother yelled at me for it later, as according to her, a child of the Kiryuin family was above common illnesses. She told me it was all in the mind, and refused to let me near medications. For many nights since I tried to

force myself to sleep, but for many others, my insomnia would get the better of me and I would lie awake in my bed, lost in thought for hours, tonight was one such night.

I rubbed my bare arms, shuddering, and clung to my blue silk nightclothes. I curled up in a foetal position on my bed, still nauseated and sticky. I thought of washing myself again, but that would mean going near water. I decided that if I went for a walk, perhaps sleep would come to me eventually, so I got up from my bed and began to pace the corridors outside my room.

Haruka had been promoted to One-Star, and she got herself a bank account, which meant that there were more records of her existence to worry about. Using what Houka showed me, I made sure her transactions were invisible to Mother should she choose to go through the One-Star bank's archives. She was stronger than I had thought, and I was running out of time. I knew her Nexus Threads were either in her navel or her upper thighs, but that wasn't good enough. I needed an exact location and I needed to keep Haruka lower in rank otherwise it would be harder to keep her a secret. And I had four months left until Mother would activate my internal Life Fibres...

"Restless again, my Lady?"

The voice I had known for twelve years snapped me out of my thoughts, I wondered what he was doing up at this hour with a flask in his hand.

"What are you doing here, Iori? It's midnight. Go back to your chambers now."

"Uncle had some chamomile tea prepared for you. I... I heard footsteps and wanted to..."

I clenched my hands into fists. I knew Soroi knew better than to patronize me with gestures like this, so all this must have been Iori's idea. No matter how many times I explained to him, snapped at him, lashed out at him, he was still stubborn in his attempts to pity me. It was times like this when I suspected him even more.

"Don't insult me. I can fall asleep without your pathetic attempts at 'help.'"

He frowned and folded his arms; he was looking at me disapprovingly. I had never seen him like that before. He had been acting strangely of late.

"Then why are you wandering about? Oh wait, it's pointless for me to ask. You haven't told me anything since we were children-"

"Don't talk about me like you know me. I've told you a thousand times."

"Yeah, that's right. I thought I knew you once... but things are different now, aren't they? Now you want to step on everyone who cares about you because you think it will make you look good, don't you? And on top of that, you've become cruel enough to plan on murdering your own sister. Yes. I don't know you anymore. You're not who I thought you were at all."

I resisted the urge to thrash him into the ground then and there. I knew if I made a scene it would wake the others.

"Do you know who you're talking to, Iori?"

He was clenching the flask to anchor himself and glared at me.

"Drop the act, Satsuki." He snarled in a guttural tone.

He hadn't called me by my first name since I was eight. He was trying to probe, I was sure of it. I would have none of it.

"I'm not sure what you're referring to."

"I knew you were many things, but I didn't know you were a coward. Well, what did I expect from someone who treats water like arsenic?"

A coward...

"YOU'RE the heir to REVOCs?!"

"That's no leader, that's just a scaredy-cat!"

Nobody who has called me a coward...

"All you do is cry and run away from everything! You're so stupid that you can't even swim!"

"Oh... are you gonna cry now? Do you want your mommy? Is mommy's widdle baby scared of the big bad swimming pool? Is she scared she's gonna drown?"

"You're scared of water! You're scared of water! You're scared of water!"

...has ever walked away from it unscathed, nobody. Those who did... everyone who did... I made sure they paid the price for it. I showed them. I made them eat their words with my own hard work.

I was no coward; I was the farthest thing from it! And anyone who had the gall to call me such a thing...

"If you weren't my cousin-"

He threw the flask on the floor, it was tightly sealed so the tea didn't spill from it. I could tell he was resisting the urge to shake me by my shoulders.

"Do you take me for a fool?! Or do you want me to be one? Is that why you bashed my head in with a table lamp?"

The memory flashed before me for a second. He was asking for it then, if he hadn't opened his mouth... I wished Soroi hadn't come in to save him. I wished I had killed him then! If I had he wouldn't be here to be so meddlesome!

"Don't tell me you're still bitter over that. Let it go."

"The more you try to cover things up the more people suspect! Don't you know that?! You think people have forgotten about the headlines in The Daily Star?!"

He realized he let the cat out of the bag; he bit his lip and sighed.

"...so you did know."

"Of course I knew. How could I not?"

"I suspected as such."

His eyes became soft, and he looked down at his feet. His arms hung to the side.

"Then you probably know how much it kills me to see this happen to you."

The more he spoke the angrier I became. What did he know? In what way was this stupid little boy qualified to advise me?!

"I never asked for your pity."

"And did I ask you to push me away?"

That did it. I grabbed him by the collar of his nightclothes and threw him on the floor with such force that his shoulder and forearm were bruised.

"GET OUT. GET OUT OF HERE, NOW. I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ANOTHER WORD FROM YOUR FILTHY LITTLE MOUTH!"

It took a while, but he got up slowly. He picked up the flask on the floor. He was hunched over and his long red hair was covering his face, I could see tears streaming down his face as he walked back to his room.

"You're too blinded by your own pride to see what's in front of you, My Lady."

Loss of Innocence

"Well, dear? Can you explain this to me?"

Satsuki hung her head in shame and stared at her half-eaten croissant when Mistress Ragyo played the footage on her tablet of her lashing out at me the previous night. She should have seen it coming, but it was too late now.

"He angered me." She retorted lamely.

"But still. That's no way to treat your cousin. The poor boy was just trying to help you. Honestly, I don't understand. You both used to be thick as thieves, and then out of nowhere you tried to maim him when you were eight. You've been using him as your own personal punching bag ever since..."

I rubbed my shoulder and winced, recalling the pain as she threw me to the floor. When we were children, I wouldn't have even dreamed she would do something like that.

"I recognize the folly of my actions, Mother."

"Don't apologize to me, apologize to him."

Satsuki got up from her chair as silently as she could, and bowed to me.

"I'm very sorry for hurting you, Iori. I acted out of anger. I assure you it will not happen again."

I knew she didn't mean it, I knew how fake her apology was, but I forgave her anyway.

"I forgive you, Lady Satsuki."

Mistress Ragyo smiled, seemingly satisfied, but I wondered if she would have more words and other things to throw at Satsuki behind closed doors. Sometimes my morbid curiosity got the better of me in that sense.

"Well, now that that's settled, let's continue breakfast, shall we?"

We ate in silence, and then we took the non-stop cable car to the Academy. Normally Satsuki and I would make small talk before we reached, but now we weren't talking at all. As I stared out the window, my mind began to wander back to the day that Mistress Ragyo was talking about...

...

"Satsuki? Satsuki?"

She's standing by the door of her room, her hair is covering her face and she's holding her shoulders. She's leaning against the door and not looking at me. I pull at her nightdress; she

swats my hand away like it was a spider.

"Don't touch me! Leave me alone!"

"You've been acting all mean lately. You don't want to talk to anybody or play games anymore..."

Why has Satsuki been acting so weird? When we were younger, we were best friends, but ever since six months ago she doesn't want to be friends anymore. Is it my fault? If it is then I'm sorry, I want to make things okay again.

"Why don't you want to play with me anymore? Did I do something bad? Did Nonon and Ryuta do something bad too?"

Satsuki looks at me, she looks like she's about to cry.

"No, Shiro. You didn't do anything. Nonon and Ryuta didn't do anything either. Now go away. I don't enjoy silly games anymore."

I remember that Satsuki has been sad too, sad and mean. If she's sad, I want to make that sadness go away too. And if she's happy, maybe she won't be mean anymore.

"Are you okay, Satsuki? Sometimes I hear you crying in your sleep, is that why you don't want to play with me? Can you tell me what's making you sad?"

She doesn't say anything to me for a few minutes; she looks like she's thinking. Then she looks at me and smiles, I think I made her feel better.

"...you're right. I'm sorry Shiro. You know what, why don't we play a game now?"

Yay! I did make her feel better! Everything will be okay again and we'll be best friends like we used to!

"Yeah! Yeah! Let's play a game now!"

She crouches down so we can look at each other; she's a head taller than me so she has to do that.

"We're going to play hide-and seek, okay? Mother is the catcher, and we both have to hide from her as long as we can. And remember, avoid the cameras too. Can you do that?"

"Okay! How long do we have to count for?"

"...a hundred."

We don't waste time. Satsuki runs one way, I run the opposite way. I think what would be a good place to hide; I see a flowerpot in one of the corridors, and hide behind it. I'm small, so I don't think anyone will see me.

"Ninety eight... ninety nine... a hundred!" I whisper, now I know time's up.

I wait for a long time, and Mistress Ragyo doesn't come by. I think I'm doing a good job. I wonder where Satsuki's hiding...

"What are you doing here, boy?"

It's Takaji, Mistress Ragyo's steward.

"Shh!" I place a finger on my lips, "We're playing hide-and seek! Mistress Ragyo can't find us!"

He smiles at me and kneels down, his hand is patting my head.

"Oh... I guess I ruined your game, then. Lady Satsuki has an appointment with her mother right now. She can't be late, you know. That would be very bad."

At school we always learned how important it was to be on time for things, we learned that when we go to Honnouji Academy, they'll expel us if we're late. And that's bad.

"Yes... that's right. That really would be bad."

"Well, since I found you, I guess I'm a part of your little game too. Now you and I are catchers, and we have to find Satsuki, right?"

"Yeah, that's right! Let's find Satsuki!"

"Now tell me, Iori, if Satsuki wanted to be hidden, where would she be?"

"The servant's quarters of course! Nobody goes there!"

So we start looking in all the rooms. We look under the beds, in the covers, in the closets, but we can't find her. Then we try Inoue's room, and I open the cupboard on the left side.

"Found you! Now you're the catcher!"

Satsuki's curled up like a ball in a cupboard. She's shaking and her eyes are big, she looks scared. Then her face changes, now she looks all angry at me.

"Good job, Iori. You're such a good boy."

Mistress Ragyo's right behind me, she holds out her arms for Satsuki as she walks towards her.

"Now Satsuki, come here. It's almost nine twenty five-"

"No..." Satsuki's voice is weak and she's shivering like she's cold.

"Dear, what's gotten into you?"

She gets out of the cupboard, runs away from Mistress Ragyo and grabs a pair of scissors from the dresser and throws it at her. Mistress Ragyo catches it with one hand.

"Stop that! Do you know how dangerous that is? If I were human I could have died!"

"Satsuki! What are you doing? Why are you doing that?"

She ignores me and tries to run out of the room, but Takaji stands in the way.

"Where do you think you're going?"

She looks angry and scared and punches Takaji in the gut. It doesn't hurt him, it just makes him mad. He's usually kind to us, why is he so mean now?

"Why you...! You'll pay for that you little brat!"

He's never called either of us brats either. He lifts her up by the shoulders. Satsuki starts struggling and kicking, trying to get out.

"Now, now, Takaji, that's no way to treat a child. Stop manhandling her this instant."

He lets her go, Mistress Ragyo grabs her wrist. Satsuki tries to shake her hand free, but can't. She's crying and whining and trying to run the opposite way.

"Calm down, dear. You'll get to play with Iori tomorrow, but now we have something to take care of..."

"No! No! No!"

She tries to break free again, but she fails.

"Stop making a scene, dear, what will people think?"

"No... no... no... no..."

She's just saying no over and over and crying now as her mother leads her up the stairs. I don't get it; Takaji said she had an appointment. Why would that make Satsuki so scared and sad? I think I'll ask Uncle Soroi about it, maybe it's something adults understand.

...

"...and then she started crying and saying 'no' over and over, she looked really scared. Why would she be scared of her own mother?"

Uncle pulls my pajama top down so my head sticks out, and hands me the bottom. He starts thinking and he looks like he might have figured it out, but he shakes his head, like he thinks he's wrong.

"I don't know, Shiro. But it's not my place, or yours, to question what goes on between Lady Satsuki and her mother. It's none of our business." He sighs as he helps me tie the knot in the pants.

"But why?! Satsuki's sad and mean all the time! Maybe if we know what it is, we can make her okay again!"

"...it's not that simple, Shiro. If Lady Satsuki wanted to be all right again, she'd tell you what was bothering her. I think she wants to keep it a secret because she thinks we might think badly of her," he messes up my hair, "Now come on, let's go brush your teeth. We'll talk about this some other time."

...

I wake up to the sound of my door opening. It's Satsuki, and she's walking towards me. She looks kind of scary in the dark.

"Satsuki, I'm sorry I ruined our hide-and-seek game..."

She doesn't answer me, her hands are in fists, and her hair is covering her face.

"Uncle said you can't tell me why you're sad because you think I'll hate you. But I won't! You can tell me, I won't get mad..."

She stands near my bed, and she grabs my neck and lifts me up, she squeezes it so I can't breathe and my face turns blue.

"What...?! Why...?!"

"You... this... is... your fault..."

I'm scared, I can't breathe, I feel like I'm gonna die. I'm crying, Satsuki hates me now, and we'll never be friends again.

"If it wasn't for you, Mother wouldn't have...!"

She lets me go and throws me to the floor, my entire body hurts. Then she grabs my table lamp and starts beating me on the head with it. I start screaming and crying loudly, I can see blood on my pyjamas and I can feel it dripping from my head.

"You're naïve and stupid and nothing but trouble!"

She hits me again with more force, I scream.

"I HATE YOU!"

She hits me again, stronger.

"I HATE YOU! I WISH YOU WERE DEAD!"

"Shiro! Shiro what's wrong?"

I can barely see anything, I'm in too much pain, but I hear Uncle's voice. I can feel myself being lifted; I think Uncle's carrying me. I start crying like a baby.

"Satsuki, what were you thinking?! You could have killed him!"

"I hate him... I wish he was dead... I wish..." she's crying and angry at the same time.

"Listen to yourself! Do you really want this? Do you want to kill your best friend, and for what?"

I hear Satsuki throw up, and then she starts bawling. That's the last thing I hear before I can only see black and hear nothing.

...

"What's the matter with you, Iori?"

Lady Satsuki snapped me out of my thoughts; she frowned at me and rolled her eyes when she noticed I was crying.

"You really are a sniveling wimp, aren't you?"

She used the same words that Touko and Sosuke would call me on purpose. I wondered then if my life would have been just the same if I had stayed with my immediate family.

"Stop it. We've reached the Academy. I can't have you looking like this. Time is running out. Do you understand me?"

I realized then there might be no turning back. It seemed that Life Fibres weren't the only things capable of altering a person beyond recognition forever. Thanks to Mistress Ragyo I had lost my cousin, and for the longest time, my only friend completely.

"Yes, Lady Satsuki."

The Man with the Iron Will

"Hitomi Katsura, August 8, 2254- September 9, 2268, Cause of Death - complications from Hybridization."

The Eulogy Wall, Uncle told me it was one of Honnouji's landmarks, and that since I'm here, I may as well visit it. He doesn't know that this is the last thing he'll ever tell me.

It's been a month since then. I was waiting for her by the Garden Square, where we usually meet, and she was running to me crying. She was wearing it... the outfit given to her by Nagita, the blue haired boy who worked for Mistress Ragyo. It was a funny sort of outfit; it looked like a pink party dress with frills, except for the patterns on the bust that resembled eyes. She was begging me for help, she said something about being pursued, and before I could react, Nagita appeared behind her. I didn't understand then, but I know now that he was attacking her on purpose. He got her to make a cut in her arm, and when the blood came in contact with the outfit... I can still see the blood coming out from her ears and eyes, and I can still hear the screams. Afterwards, to my surprise... she didn't die. Her hair and eyes were now entirely pink, she was covered in Life Fibres, and she spoke in a deadpan monotone, like how Nagita did. She started to sound not like herself, and tried to kill me. It was Nagita who saved my life... by ending hers.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry I couldn't... I couldn't protect you..."

Asuka told me to forget about her, but I can't. I came here to Honnouji because I wanted to see her one last time before...

"It's... It's my fault. If only I was stronger."

I place the bouquet of violets and the photo of us watching the cherry blossoms fall two years ago on the ledge near her name. Then I walk away slowly, and make my way to the subway station. I board the train that takes me to the No-Star district, where I'm sure I won't be seen. I realize when I come out from the underground that I've never been to the No-Star district before. It's as bad as they say.

I'm getting odd looks, whether it's because of my dyed hair, my three-star clothes, or my brass fists, I don't know, but I don't care. I see a building, Honnouji Public School. It's well in the evening so there are no children or teachers to be found. I make my way to the roof, and stare at the ground below, tears rolling down my face.

"Hitomi..."

A thought comes to my head, can I avenge her? Then I realize that it would be more honourable for me to die right here then it would be to give my family a black mark by going after Nagita.

"There's no point... if I couldn't protect her... then I can't protect anybody."

"You there..."

That voice. I've heard it before, but I choose to ignore it.

"What are you trying to do?"

I move my leg forward; I can see a pebble fall down to the pavement below, right next to her. She's looking up at me and frowning.

"Falling to your death will solve nothing. Besides I don't want to get your blood all over my suit."

I steel myself; I can't let anything stop me. I have to jump...

"You're a son of the Gamagoori family, aren't you? Come down now, or do you want me to make some calls?"

I sigh angrily. She knows how much honour means to my family. I exit the roof, and climb down four flights of stairs to where Lady Satsuki is standing, arms folded in disapproval.

I wish she hadn't been here; she shouldn't even be here in the first place.

"Lady Satsuki... may I ask what you're doing here-"

"That's not your concern."

She eyes me up and down; I don't know what she's thinking. Her gaze lingers on my brass gloves.

"...why?"

Before I can open my mouth, she turns around to see four figures coming towards us; the tallest one has a club in his hand.

"Well, well... look who decided to show her face here?" sneers the short and fat one with a leather jacket.

"Oh... you poor little rich girl, are you lost? You must be so scared..." the gangly one with hair covering his whole face taunts.

Lady Satsuki's face is neutral. She places her hands on her hips and glares at the tall one with the club. I remember that people from the colonies are so stupid that they don't fear the Kiryuins like the No-Stars do.

"What are a bunch of colony dogs doing in Honnouji?"

He laughs loudly, and the others laugh with him.

"What are we doing here? Why are you well-dressed snobs trying to keep us out?"

"City folk... they think they own the world, but they're just puppets controlled by strings!" the ugliest of the lot with a nose ring removes some stray strings from his shirt and waves them around for emphasis.

The tall one with the club's eyes gleam when he sees Lady Satsuki's satchel. He smirks.

"Hehehe... that fancy tablet you have there... that'll make us set for life..."

The ugly one licks his lips and smiles.

"I've got a better idea, Boss... it's not every day we come across a sexy young girl... why don't we take advantage of the situation AND steal her tablet?!"

My head aches and my blood boils from how uncontrollably angry I am. I turn to Lady Satsuki, her eye twitches, but I can tell she doesn't take the threat seriously.

"Looks like you're thinking straight for once!" The one with the club, their leader, clearly likes this idea, "Come here sweetie, I'm not like your boyfriend here... but I think I can show you what a man is..." he starts moving towards her, loosening his belt.

Lady Satsuki loses her composure immediately. I didn't think she could be so frightened. Her hands tremble and her face goes pale. She takes a few steps back and holds out her sword.

"Get back you vermin! Or you won't even be a man by the time I'm done with you!"

The ugly one laughs, hands clutching his stomach.

"Ooooh, I think you scared her!" The short and fat one approaches her, holding his arms out, "Oh don't worry... we'll be gentle..."

I don't even think twice. I blindly rush towards the short and fat one and punch his face in. He clearly isn't prepared for it, he screams in pain and he lies on the floor, his face all bloody and a few teeth knocked out.

"YOU MONSTER! If you want to even think of defiling Lady Satsuki you'll have to go through me first!"

The one with the hair covering his face jeers at me.

"Sorry buddy, but I like 'em thin and pretty, not huge and bulky-"

"THIS IS SERIOUS! If you worms don't get away from her-"

Too late. Lady Satsuki is too busy focusing on their leader to notice the ugly one has his arms around her waist. She twists herself free and knees him in the groin, causing him to fall over.

"Get your filthy hands off me or I'll chop them off your scrawny arms."

The ugly one takes it as a challenge; he rubs the back of his head and smiles.

"Hey... she's a fighter! I like girls like that -"

Lady Satsuki points her sword at his neck, glaring at him angrily.

"Shall I ask my mother to deal with you?"

"Yeah! Do what you do best! Run behind your mother's skirts!"

"Waaahhh! Help me mommy! The mean colony boys are scaring me! Help!" the one with hair covering his face shrieks mockingly.

"Oh... she looks sad. What's the matter? Mommy didn't hug you enough?!"

I heard that insulting Mistress Ragyo was a trigger point for Lady Satsuki, I didn't know to what extent until today. That last taunt seems to send her into a frenzy. She turns to the leader and runs towards him, but the long haired one and the ugly one are fast on her tail, and the fat one gets up and grabs Lady Satsuki's leg. I run at breakneck speed to the fat one and shake him free, grab his throat, and hold on until he turns blue. I drop his limp corpse to the ground and move on to the ugly one, Lady Satsuki had already killed the long haired one. I grab him, trap him against the floor and punch him until his face is a bloody pulp. All that's left is their leader.

Lady Satsuki doesn't waste time with him. She grabs him by the neck and holds him high. He drops the club in his hand and stares in fear as he realizes he is about to die.

"Don't talk about me like you know me!"

She throws him to the ground stabs him in the heart. When she is sure he's dead, she removes her sword from his corpse and sheathes it. She is panting and her body is shaking, her hair is covering her face. After a few minutes she takes her tablet out of her satchel, I cannot see what she is doing, only the movements of her fingers.

"...I transferred you to Honnouji Academy. You'll be going there from this April, as a member of my council." It might be my imagination, but there is a tremor in her voice, as if she is crying.

"...my Lady-"

"No protests, no questions. Oh, and if you even think about trying to end your life beforehand, I'll kill you first."

...

"Satsuki! Oh thank goodness you're safe!" Mistress Ragyo runs to her daughter in tears and pulls her close to her, one hand cradling the back of her head, the other around her shoulder, "Please don't ever go into the No-Star district again! You know how dangerous it is! Oh if this young man hadn't been here... I don't know what would have happened..."

Lady Satsuki does not return her mother's embrace; her quivering arms hang limply to her sides. Perhaps she is still in shock; I do not blame her.

"Forgive me, Mother. I assure you that I will not act in such a reckless manner hereafter."
Her voice is deadpan and formal.

"There's nothing to forgive, dear," she kisses her cheek, "I'm just glad you're all right." She tightens her grip, refusing to let go. She looks at me, her eyes still watery.

"I can't thank you enough for what you've done. The moment I heard the news, I called Tekuchi and told him what a heroic nephew he has. Tell me, if there's anything I can do to repay you, all you need to do is ask."

I want to tell her that it was actually Lady Satsuki who saved my life, but I hold my tongue. I don't want Uncle, Mother, or Asuka to know.

"Lady Satsuki has given me a seat in Honnouji Academy; she wants me to be a member of her council."

"Why of course! With someone like you around my precious little girl, I'd never have to worry again..."

I know it is not my place to, but Mistress Ragyo calling her fourteen year old daughter a little girl causes me to raise an eyebrow.

"M-Mother..." Lady Satsuki utters meekly in protest. It seems she shares my sentiment.

"Hush, dear. You'll always be a little girl to me." She looks at me again, "I know, I know. You think me over-bearing, don't you? Someday, Gamagoori, when you become a father, you'll be in the same position as me. You'll understand too..." she strokes Lady Satsuki's hair, "You'll want to protect your children no matter how old they get."

...

"Gamagoori, do you know what day it is?"

I couldn't forget.

"It's been three years already, My Lady."

Lady Satsuki sighed as she went through student records on the console in front of her. She didn't look up at me once.

"Correct."

She gestured me to come near her. I walked towards her and looked over her shoulder; on the console were Mato's records. She was a One-Star now, and more dangerous. A part of me was relieved by this, as it meant that Mankanshoku would no longer be involved.

"Your brass knuckles have come back. Ogure had them modified so that they now have retractable spikes. The spikes are made from anti-Life Fibre ammunition."

"Do you want to give me a shot at eliminating her, Lady Satsuki?"

"Yes... but I can't have you do so without reason or provocation. I have to make it appear as though Matoi got into a confrontation on purpose..."

She became silent, placed a hand on her chin and stared out the window. She sighed, frustrated. I could tell she was unable to think of an action plan at present, so she took her tablet out of her satchel and began going through a document.

"...last night's lab report, my lady?"

"Sometimes the solution presents itself to you when you choose not to think about it at all."

It had been fifteen, twenty minutes, and as she went through her lab report and started to make changes, her fingers froze. I could tell the gears were turning in her head. After an indeterminable period of time, she turned to me.

"Listen, and listen well..."

Student Timetable:

Name: Haruka Midorikawa

Class: 3-H

Monday:

Period 1: Calculus

Period 2: Economics

Period 3: Physics III – theory

Period 4: English III

Period 5: Technical Writing

Period 6: Biology III – lab (Room 108)

Period 7: Chemistry III – lab (Room 110)

Like clockwork, my timetable was sent to me in my tablet, I didn't even care that they used my fake name. I didn't think I had ever been excited to go to school before.

The school bus service was much more comfortable, but quieter than the tramway. It was somewhat lonely, I noted, as Mako wasn't there for me to talk to, and since she was still a No-Star, I couldn't even call her.

You miss her, don't you? The exuberant one.

...So what?

Remember what I told you. Remember her outburst.

She apologized, remember?

I am aware. You may visit her, but take the opportunity to gain information. See whether she really is a friend or foe, and also. Avoid contact with that man.

I realized I needed to see Mr. Mikisugi, I hadn't seen him since I transferred.

I tell you to avoid him and yet that makes you think of seeing him again. What am I to do with you?

When the bus stopped, at the Academy entrance, I got up from my seat and followed the other One-Stars to where my classrooms would be.

I remembered the Three-Star floor and how lavish it was, obviously the One-Star floor was nowhere near as grand, but it was still grander than the No-Star classrooms. The floors were shiny, the desks were clean, and there was no chaos or hustle and bustle. At 8:30, a woman in her mid-30's or so with her hair in a bun came into the room. I noticed everyone was standing up, so I did the same.

"For those who transferred from No-Star last semester, you may call me Mrs. Harata. Please know that things will be different around here. While in your previous tier, a passing grade was 50 percent, however here, a pass mark is 60. As a No-Star, your homework was written, here, you will submit all your homework to my tablet ID, which will be sent to you now. You will have theoretical as well as practical knowledge tested, and finally, and most importantly, lollygagging and tomfoolery of any kind will NOT be tolerated."

Jeez, talk about a buzzkill...

Take her words seriously, Ryuko.

Sure enough, I hear a ping from my tablet and I see Mrs. Harata's tablet ID is saved in my contacts. And then the day began. Calculus was the second half portions of our Math class, but harder, and working sums out on our tablet, where there was a time limit and a little box in the corner telling us how many sums we got wrong was not something I was used to. Economics was complex, but I actually found it really interesting, even though I knew the other former No-Stars and I would have to do catch up work.

Instead of eating lunch at the classroom, we went to the cafeteria to eat lunch. I remembered being here before and stealing an apple from some random kid. They gave us a choice of rice balls or a sandwich and fruit; I decided to go with the rice balls. It was better than any of the slop given to us at the Colony. However I noticed that in the No-Star classes, everyone would talk amongst themselves loudly during lunch, here everyone whispered, like they were discussing something secret. While in the cafeteria I also learned just how many clubs were offered at this place. I saw some students from the chemistry and biology clubs huddled in a corner near me. Some music club students were wearing their formal costumes and looking

over their sheet music stored in their tablets. I also saw some students wearing shorts and a t-shirt with wet hair; I assumed they were from the swimming club or something. From the corner of my eye, I saw one of the chemistry club students approach me, she had braided her long black hair and she was wearing a lab coat like her club-mates.

"Hey... aren't you the Hybrid who Lady Satsuki hates?"

So I guess that was my reputation in this place, huh?

"...uhhh."

"We're from the same class. My name's Momoko Tainaka, nice to meet you." She held out her hand for me to shake.

There was no way this girl was trying to strike up a conversation for the sake of it.

Indeed, handle the situation with care. Though she is only ten percent bonded with Life Fibres, she appears treacherous.

"Uhh, my name's Ryuko Matoi. Nice to meet you too." I shook her hand nervously.

"Hey, you know the economics project we have due next week? It's supposed to be done in pairs. I was wondering if we could work together on it."

"...why me?"

"Because... because the truth is..."

She held both my hands like she was going to propose to me or something, there were stars in her eyes.

"Uhh?!"

"I heard so much about you last term and... you seem so cool! Wow, usually Hybrids side with the Kiryuin family but you... wow, to challenge her like that; you must be either really brave or really stupid... but that doesn't matter! Plus you've got a special outfit even though only Mistress Ragyo's supposed to have one, and I've heard when you wear it you can actually fight Lady Satsuki!"

Hmmm... this sort of calculated adulation is designed to lower your guard, be aware of it.

My eye twitched and I smiled a fake smile. I didn't know whether to be flattered or taken aback.

"Well... it's not that-"

"Don't be so modest, I hate people like that! So, Matoi, are you going to work with me then?"

Well, if it was just for schoolwork, I didn't see why not.

"Uhh... okay."

Momoko looked as happy as a five year old with a new toy, she jumped up and down and smiled.

"Yay! I guess we'll get started tonight! I'll call you! You know how to use the tablet to make phone calls right?"

I did, but I wasn't used to it. I had never spoken on a tablet before. The only long distance communication I had ever done was write letters.

"Yeah... call you tonight."

The bell rang, and Momoko and I walked back to class together. While we walked, I kept looking at her to see if she was doing anything suspicious. She didn't whip out her tablet to call anybody or check it for the time or anything. She wasn't looking at me at all or acting shifty, this made me even more paranoid, but I had to stop thinking about it otherwise I wouldn't be able to concentrate.

Technical Writing was nothing like I'd seen before; they basically taught us how to write thesis and reports. Lab classes actually made science fun, we got to actually do the experiments with our hands, and seeing the reactions actually happen made me understand the concepts a whole lot better. The only downside to all this was a lot more homework, and actual projects.

After school I was fried, but not as much as I was when I first started the year here as a No-Star, I guessed I had gotten used to the work. I also noticed that because a tablet was all I had to carry, my bag was much more lightweight, which made me less tired. I was thinking of taking the stairs to the No-Star floor to see Mr. Mikisugi again, so I made a turn left to the staircase.

There must have been something oily on one of the steps, because I tripped and I noticed something had fallen out of my pocket for a second, it looked like a block of chalk. While trying to get my balance back I pressed a button on the side of the wall. Immediately sprinklers in the ceiling activated and I was drenched.

All of a sudden I heard a deafening boom. I was flung away by half a foot and landed on my back; I could see nothing but white smoke.

The Proud Nail

I was lying flat on my back, still on the stairs leading to the No-Star classrooms. I ached all over, but I feebly rolled over and propped myself up with my hands. My eyes burned, I looked down and started coughing, the smoke was hard to bear. I heard footsteps and strained my eyes to see who was coming, and a shadow of a very tall and muscular young man came into view.

Of course, who else could it be?

The smoke finally cleared and I could see the damage that had been done. A chunk of the left side wall had been blown out, revealing the classroom behind it. It wasn't that big of a hole, and nobody was hurt, but I knew that I was going to get in trouble for this, even though I didn't do it.

Ira Gamagoori stopped at the base of the staircase, and was towering over me, hands folded with a scowl on his face.

"MATOI! I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN! I HAD A BAD FEELING ABOUT YOU FROM THE START!" he was screaming, almost bellowing. I placed my hands on my ears because he was so loud.

"ROBBERY! ARSON! I SHOULD NEVER HAVE PROMOTED YOU IF I KNEW YOU'D COME TO THIS!"

"I didn't do it, I swear! It was this girl called Momoko who- "

"LIAR! MOMOKO TAINAKA HAS A PERFECT RECORD! SHE'D NEVER STOOP SO LOW! WELL, I HAVE TO GIVE YOU SOME CREDIT, MATOI, AT LEAST YOU'VE BEEN PAYING ATTENTION IN YOUR CHEMISTRY CLASSES!"

I realized then just what Momoko had done. During chemistry lab, it was her duty to take inventory of all the components and elements. She had gone into the supply closet after finishing her experiment, and she had looked over my work for a second before doing so. At the time, I didn't register it because I didn't know who she was. I also remembered the chalky substance that fell out of my pocket, and since Momoko intended for me to activate the sprinklers...

"YOU'LL HAVE TO PAY FOR ALL THE PROPERTY DAMAGES AND THE SODIUM YOU STOLE! BUT BEFORE THAT..."

He sprinted down the stairs before I could blink, he was surprisingly fast for someone his size, and his hand was clasped around my throat. He held my high above the ground. I struggled and kicked, but couldn't free myself.

"I'LL CRUSH YOU!"

I suddenly felt nauseous and my head began to throb, I felt my internal Life Fibres tremble throughout my body. The last time I felt this was when Kinagase attacked me with Anti Life Fibre Ammunition...

"WELL MATOI? DO YOU REGRET WHAT YOU'VE DONE? ARE YOU GOING TO BEG FOR MERCY NOW?"

He tightened his grip, and as he did, the nausea intensified and the air was cut off to my lungs.

"REMEMBER THIS! AS LONG AS I, IRA GAMAGOORI STAND HERE ALIVE, THE LAWS OF HONNOUJI ACADEMY WILL BE UPHELD!"

I told you to be careful, Ryuko.

I was, you idiot! Nothing could have prepared me for this!

Hmm... he is 30% bonded with Life Fibres, and it seems those gauntlets of his are the source of my, and by extension your discomfort.

How the hell did they get a hold of Anti-Life Fibre Ammunition?!

I believe a better question would be how this "resistance faction" came to acquire such an alloy, or the technology to produce it-

I'M BEING STRANGLED HERE!

Right. Hmm... His lower body strength is less in comparison to his upper body strength. But you don't appear to be in a position to attack. Allow me to assist you...

Suddenly Senketsu's skirt broke off into dozens of strings, all of them lunged towards Gamagoori and pushed him backward. He let go of my neck almost immediately and I turned the switch on my syringe glove and transformed. Gamagoori was about to punch me again, but I used my scissor blade to block his fist.

"Sorry buddy, but I'm not ready to die yet!"

He looked at me, momentarily perplexed, and then furious.

"I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU MANAGED TO ACQUIRE A KAMUI, AS THERE ARE ONLY TWO IN EXISTENCE, BUT I WILL PUT AN END TO THAT THING ONCE AND FOR ALL!"

He tried to grab my scissor blade, but I moved away in the nick of time. I sprinted down the stairs to the No-Star floor and kept looking behind me. Jeez, this guy was incredibly fast as he was strong, and was on a totally different league from anyone I had fought thus far, except Satsuki of course.

Remember, he is lacking in lower body strength, it also seems as though you can jump higher.

Wait, you said less coverage meant more control, but does it also mean less strength as well?

Naturally- ah. Very well. Be forewarned, I may try to take you over if I go too far. Mind yourself.

Before I could blink Senketsu's strings enveloped my legs in such a way that it looked like I was wearing red leggings. I felt stifled and restricted, like how I did before I learned how to master him. I stopped running and turned to face Gamagoori, ready to set my strategy into motion.

He lunged at me with his knuckles, fitted with the alloy designed to weaken me. I noted that his punches and kicks appeared to aim for where my Nexus thread could supposedly be located. I swiftly jumped backward to prevent him from striking my navel, and allowed my vision to turn black-and white. It appeared that the Nexus threads of his uniform were concentrated, indeed, all around his torso. His brass knuckles were not made of Life Fibres, but it seemed if I could weaken him, I would have a chance to escape.

I knew what must be done. I dodged his punches aimed for my navel, my thighs, my neck, all sensitive points, I noted. And when he had an opening in his stance, I blocked his fist and did a forward roll so that I was right behind him. I sliced through his uniform in quick yet precise motions, and before me, his uniform came undone.

I panted, slightly out of breath, this human body was something of an inconvenience in that sense. Gamagoori's expression was neutral, and then, I raised an eyebrow in confusion when he began to chuckle.

"I've underestimated you Matoi..."

He walked towards me and I cautiously held out my scissor blade, anticipating his next move.

"However..."

Yet it seemed I could not be prepared for him grabbing my leg and hanging me upside down, then throwing me to the ground and punching me in the navel with those knuckles of his. The shock caused me to revert back to normal.

"DID YOU REALLY THINK I COULD BE DEFEATED JUST BY DESTROYING MY UNIFORM?"

He was like the boxer dude except worse. A hundred times worse. Those spikes tore through my flesh all over my legs, stomach, everywhere, but especially in those areas. The smell of blood and the desire to vomit and my internal Life Fibres squirming about, like a thousand worms, and my head felt like it was going to burst.

I was going to die...

I was going to join Dad...

Without knowing anything about him... anything about anything...

Without accomplishing ANYTHING...!

And then, just when I thought it was all over, I heard another mild boom and saw smoke around me. I was confused at first, but then I remembered...

"Matoi, here are the past papers. They'll help you study for mid-terms. Oh, and before I forget..."

"What's this for?"

"If you promote... you're going to find enemies. A lot of enemies. In case you're in a bind, you can always use this. The last student who tried it was some No-Star boy named Suzuki who tried to steal a One-Star uniform. He failed though, and was made into one of Mistress Ragyo's Guinea pigs. Of course at first, he thought he was being honoured for his intelligence..."

"Poor guy."

"Yet Suzuki was human, you aren't. You may have better luck with this..."

Damn it Mr. Mikisugi was prepared for everything. I took advantage of the smoke around me and hung on to the walls to get where I had to get to next, where I was sure I wouldn't be found.

"YOU THINK YOU CAN ESCAPE WITH A TEAR GAS BOMB, MATOI? THIS ISN'T OVER YET! I KNOW WHERE YOUR NEXUS THREAD IS NOW! INUMUTA OR JAKUZURE WILL HAVE NO PROBLEM DEALING WITH YOU! LADY SATSUKI WANTS YOUR BLOOD, AND THAT IS WHAT SHE WILL GET! YOUR DAYS ARE NUMBERED!"

...

"Matoi..."

I wondered what Mr. Mikisugi was thinking when he saw me all bloodied up, cuts all over my thighs and stomach, black and blue, using my scissor blade as a crutch.

"What... what happened?"

I had experienced worse than this. To get into the Black Stripes I had to take down every single member and later Yato in one sitting. When Minako and her buddies dragged me out of the sorry excuse for a bathroom stall and threw toilet paper and rags at me, that was worse than this. Taking over the Blue Squares? That was harder than this.

And yet... and yet Mr. Mikisugi's concern for me when I was clearly down, when I had just gotten back from fighting for my life, combined with not seeing him for so long, made me react in a way that I never thought I'd react, ever. I had done something I hadn't done in years. I hobbled towards him, let go of my scissor blade, and threw my arms around him, bawling and shaking.

"I... I thought I was... I thought I was gonna die... I thought... I thought..."

"Shh..." He shushed me and pulled me closer to him, "Who was it?"

"G-Gamagoori. Satsuki made one of the Chemistry Club girls frame me for blowing up a classroom... his gauntlets... the spikes are made from the same stuff that Mohawk's needles were made from..."

"It's okay... it's okay..." his voice was soothing, as it always was, "I'll patch you up. You're safe here. He can't hurt you again."

He moved me to the couch and rummaged through his cupboard. He got out a first aid kit with bandages. I promptly removed Senketsu so I was wearing only my underwear and lied down on the couch. Nakedness didn't bother me that much anymore, it didn't even bother Mr. Mikisugi. He barely blinked at me.

"It's not that much, I've been through worse than this."

I was used to having to come up with some defensive retort like that. If there was one thing I learned from being in the Colony, it was that you should never show that being beaten up bothered you. If you were sad or scared, you should mask it with anger or brush off your pain.

"Matoi-"

Every time he called me by my last name I wanted to either scream or cry. I grabbed him by the collar and angrily glared at him.

"I told you not to call me that!"

I guessed that a few tears had managed to sneak past, because he was brushing my cheek with his thumb. I grabbed the back of his head and kissed him aggressively. He reciprocated eventually, and I could feel myself being lowered on to the couch. I broke apart from him for a second to lick his lips, and we kissed again, this time our tongues clashing.

We probably stayed like that for five, ten minutes, I wasn't sure, I had lost track of time, and I finally pulled away from him.

"I missed you." I placed both my hands on his cheeks.

"So did I."

He got up from the couch and got a pair of scissors, gauze, bandages, and alcohol from the first aid kit. I looked down at my stomach to see that my internal life fibres had already gotten to work and the wound was starting to close, but there was still pain, a lot of it. First he dipped some cotton balls in alcohol and lightly ran them over my injuries. I arched my back slightly to make it easier for him to put the bandages on.

"Ryuko... was it really that bad, the Colony?" he asked me as he wrapped the bandages and gauze over my stomach. Then he did the same to my legs.

"You don't know the half of it."

He moved to my shoulders, where there were much smaller but equally painful cuts.

"You've gotten in fights before, haven't you?" He asked as he held the scissors with the alcohol swabs between his teeth.

"Of course I did. I had to. Beat people up and they'll be scared of you, and you won't get beaten. Beat people up and you'll get to steal their crap, otherwise they'll just take yours."

He got out a smaller piece of white cloth, the same material as the bandages, and taped it to my left cheek, which was black and blue.

"Honnouji is just a more sophisticated version of that."

"At least in this place people know success when they see it! At least here people don't take your good grades and tear them to pieces, they do that with your bad ones! At least here hard work means something! At least here it's the people who are smarter than you who are above you! Not the idiots who just happen to talk big! At least here, everything makes sense!"

Talking about the Colony was just getting depressing. I hated thinking about it, I just wanted to pretend it didn't exist. I wrapped my arms around him and buried my face in his chest, it was a pretty crappy way to dodge the subject and I was injured, but I didn't care.

"What do you mean?" He pulled me away from him and walked over to a cupboard where he kept a blanket, and pulled it over me.

There was no dodging him. I never thought I'd see this day, but I had to talk about it.

"I actually have a future in this damn place! And... and everyone's trying to mess it up! It's always been that way! It always has been!"

...

Today's the big day. I've been waiting for it for months. Dad helped me pack my bags yesterday and I took my clothes and my bath stuff, I even managed to sneak Mr. Mouse in my suitcase even though Dad says you can't bring stuffed animals to school. We even got notebooks and pencils, I always wanted them, I see Dad with them all the time. Last night I was looking at them and playing with the pencils until I fell asleep.

I wear my best clothes today, a collar shirt that's actually white, not brownish white, a red skirt that comes up to my knees, and polished black shoes. I even got to wash my hair. I was mad at Dad a few days ago for cutting it all messed up though. I used to have good straight hair and he made it so that everywhere was a different length. I cried for hours. I think I made it look okay again though.

I run out of the bedroom as fast as I can with my schoolbag. Dad's standing in the doorway with my suitcase.

"Are you ready, Ryuko?" Dad asks and holds his hand out.

"Yeah! I can't wait to go to school!"

I run to him and grab his hand and we make our way out of our house. We live in a pretty decent house, one bedroom, a bathroom, a kitchen, a living room slash dining room, but it's bigger than it appears, because Dad's lab is in the basement. Outside the house though, the Colony doesn't look that great. There's barely any plants, mostly dirt, and there are small huts or concrete structures where most people live. Houses are rare, and mine is the best house in the colony. I've heard school is going to be great though, I'll get to share a room with other girls my age.

I can't wait. I can't wait to leave Dad's lab and meet other kids, and make lots and lots of friends and best of all learn things. Maybe I'll learn to be a scientist like Dad, that would be so cool!

"Dad! Come on! You said we'd get to go to school today! I wanna go now! Can't we go now?"

"Calm down, Ryuko. We'll get there eventually."

"Thanks Dad! I'm so happy! When I go to school I'm going to make lots of friends! I'm going to be smarter than all the other kids and they'll all like me! I wonder what they'll teach there? I wanna learn maths, and science, and writing, I want to learn everything! And I wanna be the best in the school!"

Dad frowns at me and looks at me in a concerned way.

"Hold on, hold on. Dreaming and having goals is fine, but remember..."

"...don't dream too much, because big dreams cause bad things. Because I'm stubborn and don't know when to quit, just like Mom."

Dad whacks me in the back of my head for that. I always wondered why Dad doesn't like to talk about Mom. I used to think it was because it made him sad. I do know that Dad says I'm a lot like how Mom was when she was little, and for some reason that bothers him.

"Oww!"

"I told you we won't discuss your mother again. She's dead. Dead and buried, forget her. I meant the other thing I told you."

Of course.

"...Don't lose your way."

"Yes."

"And that means... when you dream too much, you lose sight of what's really important. You lose sight of yourself. And when you dream too much, your internal life fibres act up, and that's why I have to keep them in check."

"Exactly right."

"And... you want me to keep my hair messy. Why?" I ask, twirling my hair with one hand.

"Because when you look orderly and neat, you look more a Hybrid than you already are."

That doesn't make sense to me.

"Why is that a bad thing? So what?"

"You don't know, Ryuko. You don't know how the world really is."

"I'm six years old, a big girl now! You can tell me how the world is!"

Before he can even finish talking to me we make it. It's a huge building with probably five floors and outside, on the dirt ground, there are other kids my age standing in front of the entrance. Some of them have their parents with them, some don't. My eyes grow wide and I pull at Dad's hand impatiently.

"Dad! Can I go now? Please?"

"Oh, all right..."

I excitedly run to where my classmates are, but now that I'm near them I can get a closer look at them. Most of them have crooked teeth, messed up hair that doesn't look washed, some have dirt on their faces, they're wearing clothes that are much too big for them or even rags. They have red eyes and are scrawny, scrawnier than me, and some of them look scared and sad. I look at myself, and I look at them, and I feel bad. I know! I'll cheer them up, if I'm nice to them they'll be okay!

"Hey guys! My name's Ryuko Matoi, nice to meet you! What are your names?"

They don't answer me. Some of them even cower behind the other kids. One of the boys glares at me and frowns.

"Hey... don't be sad. We're gonna get to learn things and play games and have fun soon."

They still stare at me as if I said I was going to kill them or something.

"I'm not gonna hurt you," I hold my hand out to them, "I just want to be friends. "

The girl nearest to me cries and runs away, two big boys stand in front of me with their hands folded, shielding the other kids from me.

"Get away from us, you alien freak!"

He pushes me down and I land on my bottom.

"If you come near us again, Hybrid, we'll kill you! Go away!"

What...? Why do they hate me? Is this what Dad meant? Does everyone in colonies think Hybrids are bad? Well then, I just have to prove I'm not bad.

Sure enough the teacher comes in, she's a middle aged woman but she already has lots of grey hair. She leads us to the classroom, which has clipboards and mats on the floor laid out for each student and a huge chalkboard. I take a seat in the front and get ready.

The teacher makes a table with eleven columns and five rows, and in them she writes all the hiragana letters. I know them, I practiced them before I came to school, but the other kids are blinking, to them they just look like scribbles.

"Very well, children. This letter is..."

She points at every letter and I can name them all, nobody else is chanting with her. When I get to all the "ta" letters she stops me for some reason.

"Matoi, enough."

What... what did I do wrong? Did I get some letters wrong?

"Do you think you're special, Matoi? Shut your mouth. I don't want to hear another word from you. Nobody else here knows hiragana and you'd do well to assimilate with your class."

What? I thought... I thought school meant you were supposed to get praise for being smart, not forced to be dumb. What... what's happening?

"That's right! You think you're so smart, Hybrid? Just because you know some stupid squiggles on the board?"

She throws her duster at the boy who taunted me earlier, and it whacks him in the face.

"Quiet, Yuuki! Now if I hear another peep from any of you brats I'll send you outside the hall!"

Brats...? I wasn't being a brat, he was. I was trying to be a good girl and answer all the questions... isn't that what adults want? Wait, if I get sad, they'll try to throw me out again. I shouldn't think about it and just keep quiet for now.

The teacher goes through the chart and makes us repeat all the letters in order five times. Next, she writes the numbers one through twenty on the board, the maths numbers, not the Kanji numbers, though I bet the kids here don't know there are two kinds of numbers. I don't think they even know how to count.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight-"

Suddenly the classroom is silent and everyone, including the teacher is glaring at me. I realize I forgot again. Nobody knew the numbers except me and I blurted them out again. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

"...what did I just tell you?"

I shut up after that, and let the teacher recite the numbers herself. Then I remember the next chapter in the maths textbook after this was simple addition sums. She's probably going to move on to that now. And of course, she does. She starts telling us how one and one are two, one and two are three, and so on.

"Now, with practice, you'll be able to do more difficult sums, like twenty plus thirteen."

"Thirty-three."

I opened my mouth again. But she asked a question to the class, didn't she? Hopefully she'll understand this time...

"Matoi..." her eyes don't look kind, and she's tapping her scale with her hand, "Where did you learn all this? Did your father teach you?"

"No. Dad didn't teach me, I taught myself. I wanted to be smart when I got to school and wanted everyone to like me-"

She walks over to me and beats me on the head with the scale, everyone in the class laughs at me. It doesn't hurt that much, it's the laughter that hurts more.

"Well, here's something you're going to have to learn about this place, Matoi. You can't just race ahead of everyone else here and leave us in the dust. You can't strut around like the Kiryuins and act like you're so clever because of the little strings in your head. You have to fall in line. You're a goat in a herd, and you'd better act like it. Now I'm going to teach you that lesson..."

No... no! This isn't how school is supposed to be like! At school the teachers like you when you're smart, the kids like you when you're neat and clean and nice! Not mean and stinky and stupid! No adult would want you to be like that! This doesn't make sense! None of this makes any sense!

"Put your hands out, palms down, knuckles up, DO IT!"

I hold my hands out like she says, and she beats them with her long scale, the other kids' laughter gets louder and louder. Some even scream at the teacher to beat me more.

"...fifteen!"

My hands are red.

"...sixteen!"

It hurts... make it stop...

"...seventeen!"

They're bleeding now, my eyes are burning and I can't stop crying.

"...eighteen!"

More blood comes out...

"...nineteen, and a great big TWENTY!"

My hands are mangled and bloody. I won't be able to write tomorrow, or the next day... maybe not ever again. I'll be stupid just like them... they want me to be stupid... this is stupid... everything is just stupid!

"You count just like that, don't you? You know how to use numbers like that, don't you?" She turns around and looks at the other kids, who stop laughing immediately.

"We're done for the day. See your parents off and get to your rooms, all of you."

I silently walk out of the classroom with my bags, holding my mangled hands out, when I'm sure the teacher isn't looking, I start running. I want to go back to Dad, at least he doesn't beat me. Why did I want to go to this horrible place? Why?

I make it to the grounds where the parents are standing, and Dad is there. I run to him crying, and try to cling to him as best I can.

"It's horrible, Dad! The teachers and kids hate me! They hate Hybrids and they hate smart people! The teacher beat me and said I'm better off stupid and stinky like everyone else! Tell them, Dad! Tell them to stop beating me! Take me back home! I want to stay here with you!"

Dad pushes me away, and he just looks at me. I think he's mad, but I can't tell, he's crying too.

"I'm sorry, Ryuko. You don't have any other choice. It's better this way."

What? He wants me to stay in this bad place with mean people? Why can't he take care of me? Why is he leaving me all alone?

"Why...?"

"You don't know, Ryuko. In the cities, do you know what they do to Hybrids? They round them up, take them to REVOCS and present them to Kiryuin scientists so they can do horrible experiments on them. I don't want that to happen to you-"

There he goes again with that. He used to tell me scary stories of Hybrids who got caught by the rainbow lady and her friends. I'm not going to be one of them.

"I DON'T CARE!" I scream, "I don't want to stay here! I'll be quiet! I'll hide in your lab! I'll make sure the rainbow lady doesn't find me! I'll do anything just don't let me stay here!"

He drags me to one of the walls where nobody can hear. He slaps me hard and grabs me by the collar of my shirt.

"The rainbow lady WILL find you, Ryuko. The more you scream, the more you try anything, the more you try to run, she will find you. I'll give it to you in writing, she WILL find you!"

Why can't you understand that? Why can't you get it through your thick skull that I'm trying to save your sorry hide? I'm trying to save your life!"

"How do you know? All you've been doing is running anyway! And now you're dumping me here so you can run even more!"

He drops me on the floor, I land on the sand with a couple of scrapes in my elbow.

"One day, when you're older, you'll understand."

He starts walking away. He can't do this! Dad can't do this! He can't leave me here with all these horrible people! He can't! He can't!

"NO!" I start crying and clinging to his leg, "Don't leave me! No!"

He shakes his legs to get me away, I just cling tighter.

"Where are you going? Come back! Come back!"

He reaches down and grabs me, and flings me across the ground, where I land at the edge of the gate. I can't get up, but I can reach out. If I scream louder, he'll turn around. I'm sure of it.

"HELP! NO! PLEASE! TAKE ME BACK! PLEASE!"

"Take care, Ryuko."

I'm not staying here... I can't be staying here... this isn't real... this can't be...

"NO! NO! NO!"

I can't see Dad anymore, he's gone. He's gone for good... he left me here forever...

"NO!"

I start to ram my fists into the ground, I guess my internal life fibres healed the wounds from the teacher earlier.

"I HATE YOU! STUPID! STUPID! STUPID!"

I hit the ground as hard as I can, imagining it's Dad, the teacher, that stupid Yuuki who laughed at me. Eventually I make two small craters in the sand.

"GONE! GONE! ALL ALONE! DAD'S GONE! MOM'S GONE! EVERYONE'S GONE FOREVER!"

I'm tired, tired and my throat hurts and my new dress is all dirty. I wish Mom was still alive, I wish she was like how I dreamt she was, a nice lady in a long white dress with shiny neat black hair and blue eyes like me, who lived in a big fancy house. I wish I could just curl up to her and cry.

"All alone... nobody... stupid and stinky and dumb... and all alone..."

I lie down in the sand and cry and cry, and wrap my arms around my knees and chest. I imagine that Mom's there calming me down, telling me I'm safe and that the mean kids can't hurt me anymore...

"I wanna go home... I want my dad... I want my mom..."

And then I feel myself being lifted up, and it's Yuuki. His hands are around my throat, and all the other kids are with him, sneering at me and laughing.

"I told you I'd kill you if you ever came this way again, Hybrid."

...

I never told anyone about that in such detail, I mean, Mako knew about it, but just the short version. I never liked reliving my memories in detail because I would relive all the feelings I experienced then. All the sadness, all the anger, the fear... it scared me and bogged me down at the same time. Yet... around Aikurou... the words just came spilling out like a waterfall.

I was sleeping on my side, so I couldn't see Mr. Mikisugi's face or what he was thinking. I did feel him nudge me a little so he could lie down behind me, and he placed his arm around my waist and lightly rested his face against my neck.

"Such is the way of this world. The cities want you to run the rat race, the colony denizens are crabs in a bucket. But you... you're neither here nor there." He whispered in my ear.

"Then where the hell do I belong?"

"...in the new world that you will help us create. The Kiryuin family, the world they want, a world designed only for them and their ilk, that's not the world for you or any of us."

"Then what is the world we're fighting for?"

"A world where everyone has an equal chance. A world where anyone, not just the book smart can thrive. A world where parents don't treat their children like cattle. A world where we can pursue our dreams without worrying about losing our souls. A free world, in which we can be together without any problems. That, Ryuko, is what we are fighting for. Is that the kind of world you want?"

"...yeah. More than anything."

Masquerade

I'm walking through a desolate area. I see an old and decaying building in the distance, and dirt, dirt as far as the eye can see.

I can barely walk, I can hardly feel my body, all I can think of is food, or water, or shelter. It matters not how I get it. I look to the building, and I feel a sense of dread, as though I know I was there before, and I never want to go back there again.

I see someone, they're carrying bread. I don't hesitate for even a second. My vision goes red, and I lash out at them. Before I know it, I turn to see a corpse sprawled on the floor, blood all around, their intestines tossed to the side. I take the bread in my bloody hands and eat it in a flash. Then I move forward as if nothing had happened.

...

A nightmare, again. Yet, yet this was not like the nightmares I had as a child. My vision would be tinted red in these dreams, and I felt as though I was in someone else's body, experiencing someone else's feelings. In my dream, I had killed a boy for a loaf of bread with my bare hands. I recall what seemed like a lifetime ago, when the sight of blood made me bawl uncontrollably. I even remember what happened to cause it.

No, no. Fuyuki was long dead. I saw him die. I saw his internal Life Fibres burst through his brain in a mess of green strings and blood. The five year old child of that day lost a brother and was irreparably scarred. Now, however, I knew he had to die. Had he lived, he would be destined to follow Mother's footsteps, and I would be no more than second, damaged, a failure.

And Haruka was still alive... still alive in spite of my efforts. Still alive and ready to pounce on the soon-to-be empty position of the Head of the Kiryuin Conglomerate, a position that was destined to be mine, by any means necessary. Gamagoori may have failed to eliminate her, but it wasn't all for naught, as now I knew for sure that her Nexus thread was in her navel. All I needed to do was have either Inumuta or Jakuzure take care of the rest.

I looked down at the Kamui. Sometimes, if one of our sessions went on particularly long, I would change into it and take Bakuzan to the terrace, where I used to take fencing classes, and practice sword-fighting using the training simulation until I had exerted myself enough to expel that tingling light headed sensation from my body, and the nausea that came with it. And hopefully, exert myself enough to sleep. I had succeeded in both fronts this time.

I had gone through the usual routine, bathing as quickly as possible, makeup, and since it was a Sunday, a more tasteful outfit. A peach off the shoulder top with puffed sleeves, a white mini-skirt trimmed with frills, peach ballet flats with a bow. As for my hair, I neatly combed it into a side braid kept in place with a pink ribbon. Mother liked this outfit, it was one of her favourites, to both my relief and dismay. I knew if I kept one of the napkins in my lap, I could save myself somewhat.

As I often wondered, I didn't know why I still did these things. As a child I tried many, many things to protect myself. Run, hide, wear dowdy and modest clothes, lock my room door and cower under the bed, keep my hands or any other object in my lap and use them as shields... all of them failed, and all of them just made her angrier. Yet... I couldn't passively comply, no matter what I did. I couldn't shake the desire to stand my ground, to fight, to scream.

Endure. Endure. Endure. That is all you can do right now. It will end. When your Internal Life Fibres are activated, it will end. You'll never have to see your body as a target again, you'll never have to enter the grand baths again, and you'll never fear again, you'll never be unsure again. Just endure. Endure. Endure.

I had to repeat that to myself, over and over, as I made my way down the stairs to the dining hall. I had to get Haruka killed without Mother knowing about it, then I had to keep using the Kamui, then Mother would activate my Internal Life Fibres, then I would be the heir, the real heir. I would be an equal to Mother, not a tool, a puppet, a plaything.

Endure. Endure, and don't lose your way.

"Don't lose your way..." that was something Soroi said Father used to say often. I fancied the saying, I had to admit, though I could never say it around Mother. According to her, and Soroi, I wound up taking to him, and seeing anything to confirm that would make Mother livid.

"Pathetic. Just pathetic. Soft hearted, demure, compassionate... it doesn't matter that you have good ideas in that head of yours, such qualities will only make the world laugh at you, at us. You're a disgrace to the Kiryuin name, just like your father."

"You have a good heart, Miss. A good heart, and a creative mind. When put together, you can achieve great things. You truly are your father's daughter..."

And in the end, my father abandoned the Kiryuin family and their cause because of his good heart, which I unfortunately had in common with him. Yet I knew I was not my father, I wouldn't give up. I wouldn't allow myself to be led down the same path he walked on.

When I finally came to the dining room, Mother was already there, but Iori wasn't. Perhaps he hadn't woken up yet. Soroi was standing near the entrance in case I or my mother needed anything.

"Good morning, Mother." I bowed deeply, I hoped she wouldn't see that I was tugging at my skirt to pull it down. Since I was very young, I had a habit of tugging at my clothes whenever I was nervous.

"Good morning, Dear." She smiled her usual smile, and I walked to the table to take a seat next to her. I gingerly took the cloth napkin next to me and unfolded it, placing it on my lap so that it would cover my knees.

On Sundays, we had a typical Japanese breakfast, instead of the croissants we usually had on weekdays. Grilled mackerel, miso soup, rice and seaweed, natto, and pickled plums. I served

myself four mackerel pieces, rice, seaweed, and two plums in a bowl, and looked down at my food as I ate. I hardly cared for natto, so I left it aside.

"Tell me dear, by the end of today, what are you expected to do?"

A daily ritual. Ever since I graduated pre-preparatory school I was expected to have a routine and follow through with it. I had to be constantly at work with something, every hour involved studying, places to go, deadlines to meet. And of course, I'd be under surveillance in my room to make sure I never wavered from it, lest I be subjected to Harime's mockery, or worse...

"When I finish my breakfast, it will be 7:30. After which I will take one minute to wash my mouth, and then I will complete two University Entrance Examination mock tests, which will take until lunch-time, at 1:00 to complete. After half an hour of lunch, I will accompany you to today's board meeting and take detailed notes, then show these notes to you. "

At that moment, Iori came into the room wearing a blue sleeveless collar shirt and black jeans. His long red hair was tied in a bun.

"Good morning, Mistress Ragyo, Lady Satsuki." He bowed to the both of us, then pushed his glasses which were falling off the bridge of his nose.

"Good morning, Iori. You're just in time for breakfast."

He took a seat opposite to me, and served himself natto, pickled plums, and rice with seaweed, and tried to look as disinterested in our discussion as possible.

"Now dear, you were saying?"

"I will show the notes to you. When this is over, at 3:30, I have to practice the five pieces I will be playing for REVOCS' 117th Anniversary Ceremony on November 8th. At 4:30, I have a photo shoot for next month's magazine, which will be over by 6:00. At 6:00, I will get started on my advanced mathematics sums, finish my Tailoring lab report, and complete two paragraphs for my economics thesis. At 8:30 we will have dinner. At 9:00 you and I will go over what we did for the day and you will give me feedback. At 9:30, I will go for bath. At 10:00 I will train with the Kamui. At 11:30 I will retire for bed."

By the time I finished, I had finished my rice bowl and was serving myself miso soup. I made sure to look straight at Mother while telling her all this, she was quite particular about eye contact. Lack of eye contact was a sign of uncertainty, dishonesty, or worse, fear.

"Good," she seemed satisfied enough, but when she saw me reaching for more mackerel, she glared at me and swatted my hand, making me drop my chopsticks, "Enough. For goodness sake you're becoming a glutton these days. I can't have you spoiling your lovely figure by gaining weight."

Iori gave me a look, trying his best not to scoff. I was only 48 Kgs. Thanks to Mother's excessive diet control, going for photo shoots on a regular basis, and at times being flat out

unable to eat after our sessions, I was the skinniest in my class. Jakuzure, the shortest girl in our class, weighed more than me. Of course, I wouldn't dare point this out.

"I will make an effort not to indulge so excessively hereafter, Mother."

"You'd better, dear. Now get going, what time did you say you would start, 7:30? It's 7:25. Now I have business to attend to, do not disappoint me." Mother got up from her chair and left the dining room, making her way to the lift to go to her office on the top floor.

Iori soundlessly made his way to his room, presumably to take care of his studies. I briskly walked up to mine, and first made my way to the attached bathroom. I washed my mouth with mouthwash, twice, then placed whitening strips on my teeth, which I had to do because of all the tea I drank.

I walked over to the eastern corner of my room, to my long and wide L-shaped desk facing a window. I took a seat at the desk and rolled the chair over to my shelf where I kept all my tablets. I chose the one where I had stored all my preparatory tests, and set to work.

It didn't matter that I was Ragyo Kiryuin's daughter. I had to go through the same system as every single Three-Star child. I took the same diagnostic test at the age of three to get into Honnouji Pre-Preparatory School, the same assessment test to get into Preparatory School at the age of six, and performed so well that I could go to grade 2 straight away, and the same Evaluation at the age of nine to get into Honnouji Academy. And now, I would be taking the same University Exam to get into Tokyo University, the country's top institution for higher studies.

I recalled, when I was 13, telling Mother that I wanted to major in Tailoring, like Father. She snapped at me and said that if I wanted to continue the family line, I had to major in Business Administration with a minor in Political Science. She said I could always study Tailoring in school, and didn't want me growing up to be a "hack more obsessed with his little inventions than the future of his family." And of course, she extended our session to one and a half hours. I knew better than to bring up the subject of my line of study afterwards.

I had to get top marks in the University Exam and get a 10.0 in university. Then at the age of 25, before I officially became the CEO, I would have to choose my future husband. Either Inumuta or Gamagori, or perhaps abroad. The Gautier family of France was out of the question, as they were my second cousins. Jaehwa, the second son of the Seo family in Korea showed some interest, and there was Leonard Moore from the United States, who, unlike his more subdued elder brother, was so boorish that I couldn't stand to be in the same room as him.

When I was very little, perhaps around five or six, I wanted to marry Ryuta Jakuzure. It seemed like the perfect match to me. The Jakuzures and the Kiryuins had been closest allies for decades, he appeared to have good credentials, and Nonon and I would be sisters in law. I childishly hoped that we'd be happy together like Mother and Father were once. However he was disowned when he failed his Evaluation. There was also a time when I thought I had feelings for Nonon, but unlike Two and Three Star families who were free to marry whoever they wanted, I had to marry a man if I wanted an heir. And of course, Takarada was off-

limits. The last time he ever contacted our family was when I was eleven years old, and the reason for his being barred from nearing us lied with me.

Instinctively, I turned to my bed-side table and saw the conch shell. Why didn't I throw it away yet? What was I still clinging to?

"Hey, Lady Satsuki! Check this out! Look at all these seashells! There must be hundreds of them here, I'm going to pick the best ones!"

"...I see. Fascinating."

"Come on! Come closer!"

"This is one of Mother's favourite dresses. I don't wish to get it wet. I don't have much interest in seashells. I'll stay here."

"Woah! Look at this! It's huge! Hey, you know in the old days, people used to use them as horns, like this!"

"Nightfall will come soon. I don't want to be here when the tide comes in."

"...hey, I just realized something. Lady Satsuki, you don't like water very much, do you?"

"Don't be silly, Takarada."

"I get it. You're Ragyo Kiryuin's daughter. You can't show fear, even if you want to. Here, why don't you have this? If you're ever scared, just signal me with it, and I'll be there. Nobody will ever know, and you won't have to hide anymore."

"...I doubt that day will ever come, Takarada, but I accept your gift."

Did I actually believe that he would come to my rescue if I just signalled him? Perhaps that was exactly why I should put all thoughts of him aside. He was no different... One of the most important things I ever learned in my life was that physical intimacy, gestures of affection and love, and sexual contact were all nothing more than traps. They were designed to manipulate, control you, and to leave you at someone's mercy. If you took the bait, you gave them an invitation to use you as they saw fit. Takarada temporarily made me forget this, and thankfully I remembered before it was too late.

I had to concentrate. And of course, I had to eliminate Haruka. I couldn't let anything dampen my resolve. I had to keep working...

Three people are behind me, two guys and one girl. They grab me by my arms and drag me somewhere; I don't even put up much of a fight. I just beg them to stop. They just laugh and taunt me.

Their voices... their voices are shrill and high pitched, like nails on a chalkboard.

They stop, and I hear more voices, more voices laughing at me. They think I'm weak and stupid, that's why they're mocking me, and they're right.

I feel a kick to my back, and they push me in. The effects are instantaneous. As soon as the water hits me I feel as though a thousand insects are crawling about me, I feel like I'm going to vomit, my eyes burn, my legs weaken, electricity courses throughout my body.

They laugh, they jeer, and they hold my head down to prevent me from coming up to the surface. I'm not angry, just paralyzed with fear.

"Are you scared of the big, bad swimming pool? Are you scared you're gonna drown?"

...

My eyes flew open; I turned to the clock on my bedside table. It was 8:00 in the morning. I shouldn't have fallen asleep wearing Senketsu again. Then I wouldn't have had these stupid water dreams.

Okay, what the hell is going on? If Satsuki's Kamui wants to tell me something, why can't she be clearer? Of all the things to fixate on, why choose water?

If I knew, I would tell you. Perhaps she is trying to intimidate us.

But why water?!

That I do not know. It could be the component that is related to the host.

Are you insinuating that Satsuki thinks I'm afraid of water?

Unlikely. In fact, the more it happens, the more convinced I am that these visions are unintentional.

Wait... then that would mean... oh, wait. That's even more implausible. I don't think one of the most powerful people in the country would have such a stupid fear.

Agreed, so I believe it's best that you take care not to wear me while sleeping, to prevent these visions from happening again.

I remembered last night, being a One-Star meant I had classes on Saturdays as well, albeit only for half a day. I was working until I fell asleep without changing or anything. Today was Mataro's birthday and I'd be visiting Mako after about one and a half weeks. I took a bath and dressed myself up as well as I could. I noticed my hair had grown out a bit since I was a No-Star. It was now slightly past my shoulders, but still uneven. I packed some pocket change, my tablet, my bus pass, and my scissor blade just in case, and of course Mataro's gift. I could only get him No-Star clothes, but the ones they sold here were actually quite stylish. It was a blue polo shirt with a frog on the left side and black jeans to go with it. I also brought a cake, a small vanilla and strawberry cake with pink icing and nine candles, and some actual beef and pork croquettes, I thought it would be a welcome change for them.

I left my apartment and remembered to lock the door, then I took the cab back to the No-Star district. It felt a little surreal to go back there even though it hadn't been long. My eyes had trouble adjusting to all the filth.

Ryuko, remember. Observe them. The exuberant one isn't completely trustworthy, nor is her family. Remember, watch, friend or foe.

You're too paranoid.

What exactly is the occasion you are attending? Why celebrate the day you're born? It seems unnecessary.

Well, humans are kind of sentimental that way. I mean it seems strange to you because Life Fibres are born as adults straight away but humans have a... larva stage if you will, and the humans that had the larva develop an attachment to it. So to them, the day their larva was born is a monumental occasion. At least that's the best way I can explain it.

I understand... but I don't understand.

Explaining the idea of parents, kids, and birthdays to Senketsu was too much of a headache. So I shut up as soon as I made it to Mako's house. I knocked on the door and waited for any one of them to answer.

"RYUKO!" Before I could even anticipate it Mako jumped me. Her arms were around my neck as we spun around a little.

"Ryuko! You're actually here! I missed you! Mom and Dad and Mataro missed you too! Actually we didn't think you'd come, you being a One-Star and all..." That made me a little uncomfortable. I remembered what Senketsu said about assessing if she was really my friend. Did she still resent my moving up in rank while she stayed down below?

"Oh come on. I'm not suckered in by them. I still know what's important and all. Besides, look what I've brought!" I showed her the cake and the croquettes and she squealed with happiness, enough to break my ears.

"Wow! Mataro's going to love it! MATAROOO! LOOK WHAT RYUKO BROUGHT YOU!" She grabbed both the food and the gift immediately and sprinted into the dining room slash kitchen.

I walked into the house and I heard barking, Guts ran towards me, wagging his tail and jumping on me. I knelt down and scratched the side of his ears, and he stared at me, eyes wide and tongue hanging out.

"You missed me too, did you?" I asked him, even though I knew dogs can't talk. He ran back to the dining room and sat next to Mako. I took a seat at the familiar low table, Mako's parents were sitting there, smiling at me, and Mataro sat opposite to me with a cardboard cap on his head. The food was already on the table, and Mataro's eyes were gleaming.

"You actually brought a cake and real croquettes and everything? You're awesome, Ryuko!"

I felt an odd feeling in the pit of my stomach, good, but odd. Seeing Mataro so happy like that made me feel like there were butterflies in my stomach. Usually seeing other people happy just made me mad, I didn't know what was happening now.

"Eh, no big deal. Happy Birthday, Mataro," he was about to grab some icing from the cake right away but reached across the table and I grabbed his hand, "Woah, woah. Don't you want to open your gifts first?"

He sighed and reluctantly reached for the boxes next to him; one from me, one from Mako, and one from his mom and dad. First he opened the gift from his parents, a pair of new notebooks. Mako gave him one of those spinning tops with a handle and string. He seemed to like both of them. And then he started to open my gift.

"Oh man, this shirt! It's just like the one I used to have-" Mako pinched his other hand, causing him to wince and suddenly become more subdued, "... that came from the second-hand market two years ago! But this one's brand new!"

Rather suspicious...

Yeah, I know. That shirt isn't available in No-Star Districts unless it's used.

A thought suddenly came to me. Did Mako's family ever... actually climb up the ladder at one point? Maybe they were One-Stars once and Mako slipped up in a mid-term or something. It would explain why she's so resentful of me, and why she's so secretive, and how she came to know about those silly rumours about Ragyo in the papers.

That is quite likely. However, I believe you should try and probe to see for yourself.

Mako's mom had made those mystery croquettes and miso soup. After being a One-Star for a week, it was a little hard to choke down. I remembered though I had eaten literal slop at one point, and adjusted quickly. Mataro was the birthday boy, so he got the real croquettes and was devouring them like a starving man would a piece of bread.

After we ate our food, we lit the candles and sang "Happy Birthday." Then we each fed Mataro a small piece of cake before we cut it and got some pieces for ourselves. It was the best cake I had ever eaten, and it looked as though the entire family, especially Guts who was begging Mataro for a second helping, felt the same.

"This was the best birthday I had ever had! If only Masaomi was here, here, then it would have been even better! Mako says he used to like anything with sugar in it though. He would have probably eaten the whole cake in one sitting."

Come to think of it, not once, ever, in the time that I had stayed with Mako's family, had they ever mentioned Masaomi. In fact, I almost forgot about him. The room had gone very quiet, and everyone was staring at Mataro like he had done something horrible. Mako was noticeably perturbed, her eyes were droopy like she was going to burst into tears.

"Mako, what exactly... happened to Masaomi?"

Nobody was saying anything, for the longest time. Everyone in the Mankanshoku family was just looking at each other like they were speaking a secret language with their eyes, and I was the only one left out of this conversation. Finally, Mako spoke up.

"He's gone, Ryuko. He's gone and he's never coming back. It's better we just forget about him, it's better that we just pretend he never existed."

The Infiltrator

"Tesla! Tesla!"

Where could he have gone? I remember the Frisbee making its way towards the garden before I lost the radio signal. As usual, he bounded after it, running as fast as he could.

"Tesla! Come here!"

I make my way into the greenhouse and gingerly open the door. The collar ID tracker in my tablet shows that he is somewhere around here. Sure enough, I see the Frisbee near a rosebush, and Tesla digging up a pot of tulips. A part of me is worried, Toshio is probably going to be mad at me for this. He should have been born into the Sanageyama family given how interested he is in gardening and plants.

"Tesla!"

He turns around immediately and runs towards me, knocking me over. He sits on me and begins furiously licking my face.

"Okay! Okay! You found me! Now come on, let's go inside. It's getting late."

He whines in protest. He didn't like the house, even when he first came to us he hated the house. He always loved being outside.

"I'll give you biscuit! You want biscuit, don't you?"

That seems to cheer him up, and he follows me back inside. He doesn't even need a leash, I trained him so that he'd follow me if I told him to. I look down at my clothes, my white jeans are stained with dirt, and I clearly need to change. So I take the lift to my room. I know I have to be back soon, Dad expects me to be doing homework by now.

However, before I can make it to my room, I see Dad and Toshio discussing something in detail. And they turn around and look at me. The both of them look at me as they usually do, with patronizing disdain.

"Running around with that animal again? What else is new?"

He talks to me with disrespect, he always does, even though I'm older. Ever since Dad named him the heir he's been treating everyone like garbage, including Dad, but he doesn't seem to mind. He just puts an arm around Toshio's shoulder and steps forward.

"Now, now, Toshio, be nice to your brother," He doesn't mean it, he's just saying it to placate the both of us, "Don't blame him for being fixated on such childish trivialities..."

They walk off and take the stairs to the board room, leaving me and Tesla standing in the hall. He looks at me.

"Don't listen to them, I'm not going to let anything happen to you. Don't worry."

...

The next morning, Tesla isn't in his bed.

I call out to him, twice, thrice, no sign of him. I open my tablet to search for him, but his tracker is removed from his collar. I look in the garden, the kitchen, the atrium, all the places he likes to frequent, and he isn't there.

"Tesla! Tesla!"

I run to the great hall, where Dad and Mom are discussing the agenda for today's board meeting. They look up at me, clearly furious that I interrupted them.

"Mom, Dad, where's Tesla?"

Mom looks at Dad uncertainly, she's playing with her hands and frowning. After a minute, Dad speaks.

"Houka, you may not succeed us, but you're going to have to start cleaning up your act. What will people say if they see a son of the Inumuta family running around with a dog instead of being productive?"

No... no... no this couldn't be happening... I promised Tesla that nothing would happen to him... This can't be happening...

"...where is he?" I almost shriek in terror, "What did you do to him?"

"Calm down, Houka," Mom holds out her hands, "We sent him to Honnouji. He's going to help out at REVOCS' lab. Don't worry. He won't miss you at all. Now please don't panic."

It won't be the same... will the scientists play with him? Will they take him on walks? Or talk to him? Or will they just keep him in a cage? I doubt they will. He's going to be miserable over there...

Why did they send him away without telling me? How could they? How could they do this? I didn't... I didn't even get to say goodbye...

"Houka, twelve is well past the age for keeping an animal around. Enough is enough."

...

I can't take it anymore. It's been weeks and I haven't heard a word about Tesla despite constantly inquiring about him. I know Mom and Dad won't approve of me doing this, but I don't care.

Running away was easy, I just had to sneak out while everyone else was asleep, wear a cowl over my head to cover my blue hair, and take the subway to the One-Star district. Getting into REVOCS website was the hard part, but I did it.

As I comb through the source code of their website, I see nothing but standard information about their stocks, their production lines, and research on Life Fibres. I know that they occasionally upload footage of their labs and the work they undertake there. So they had to have security cameras all over the place, including in the mansion itself. I hope I can find the IP address of their cameras so I can check on Tesla, I have to know if he's okay.

Suddenly, I stop and notice a few choice lines of code stand out to me. An embedded video file named "Exhibit A: Canis Lupis." The video is only visible to those who have a company login, a login ID and password I happened to obtain from one of Dad's employees.

...What does this mean? Does this mean that REVOCS does testing on animals? No. No that can't be true. The Kiryuin family wouldn't do such a thing. Mom and Dad wouldn't allow something like that to happen to Tesla, would they? I know for a fact that Life Fibres are always mixed with greysilk because otherwise they can cause things like mood swings or chronic pains, so even if they do test on living beings... it shouldn't hurt them.

I click on the video, my hands shaking. I see three scientists checking on cages of all sorts of animals, dogs, cats, rats. I see a tabby cat, a pug, and a family of rats, A fourth comes in with a black Shiba Inu on a leash. I resist the urge not to call out Tesla's name, and clench the tablet and keep watching.

They inject him with what appears to be a tranquilizer, and as he sleeps, they shave his hair with a razor. Then, they cut open his skull and bring out, on tongs, a bundle of purple string. They attach themselves to Tesla's brain and squirm down to the rest of his body.

"They're turning dogs into... Hybrids?"

I don't understand why they're doing that, but the procedure usually isn't lethal. Some people do experience changes in behavior and mood afterwards, but I don't know about animals. Well, I remember learning in school that we would have remained apes if we didn't come across Life Fibres, which increased our intelligence. Are they trying to do the same to dogs, and make them as smart as we are?

They attach sensors to his brain and place him in a machine. I raise an eyebrow. I don't remember this being a part of Hybridization. Don't they usually lie you in a bed and pass a mild electric current to your brain and pulse points?

One of the scientists pulls a switch, and the electrical current that passes through Tesla is anything but mild. He writhes, he convulses, he whimpers and screams. I stare at the video open mouthed.

"W-Why?!"

REVOCS stands for the betterment of everyone... why would they be so cruel? Why would Mistress Ragyo take this lying down? Why would the Research and Development department of REVOCS allow their employees to do any of this?

After what seems like an eternity, they stop, and Tesla's eyes and the top of his head are purple. The scientists don't look done though, they wait and observe him intently.

Tesla starts shaking his head and running in circles, like how he used to chase his tail when he was a puppy. He starts growling and foaming at the mouth, even though he had his rabies shots. And then he runs to the wall behind him, ramming his head into it.

"Tesla...?"

A purple string bursts through his back, leaving spatters of blood in its wake. And Tesla screams. Two more through his torso, his hind legs, and then he cries tears of blood, and his head bursts. Life Fibres, blood, brains, entrails... everywhere...

My head aches, my stomach churns. My mouth is dry. The world around me is spinning. I shake my head to ground myself, but can't help and stare. I want to look away, I want to deny the fact that they killed him... but I can't.

"No..."

The Life Fibres slither like snakes, and combine together into a long singular creature, and leap towards one of the scientists, covering his face. He screams and struggles to pull them off, while the other two try to assist him.

"NO!"

The screen goes black and a popup with an intruder alert appears in the centre, alarm noises playing in the background. My IP address and location show up soon afterwards. I take it as a sign to get out of this old building.

I sprint for the life of me to the stairs, and sure enough I hear the sounds of a helicopter and breaking glass. I try to leave, but three Law Enforcement members stand in the doorway, pointing lasers at me. I normally admire these people, but knowing that they allowed Tesla to die just makes me angry with them.

"You there! How did you manage to hack into the most secure website in Japan? We want answers now! Tell me how you got in or we'll shoot!"

I'm angry, but afraid. I don't want to die. I kneel down in front of them and beg, crying and beating my fists into the floor.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I... REVOCS... they... my dog was in there... testing... animals... I wanted... to know if he was okay... but..."

The blood, the screams, it all comes back to me and I don't hold back.

"YOU DID THIS! YOU CUT HIM UP AND LET HIM DIE! YOU KILLED MY DOG! WHY?! WHY DID YOU? HOW COULD YOU! YOU KILLED HIM! HE DID NOTHING WRONG!"

My eyes are so clouded with tears that I can't see, but I can hear them lift up their lasers.

"Stop."

A voice, a girl's voice, saves my life. I wipe the tears from my eyes and get a good look at her. Mid-length jet black hair, piercing blue eyes, a full white business suit. No mistaking who she is.

"This is the most secure website in this country... and yet, you got into it. Something beyond the scope of many adults." She walks up to me, I suspect she's going to hit me and I recoil from her. Instead, she yanks the cowl off my head. She raises an eyebrow.

Lady Satsuki will understand. If I just explain to her what REVOCS is doing... maybe her mother can punish those scientists for what they did...

"Blue hair... a son of the Inumuta family. While technological prowess is to be expected from you, I can't help but be impressed by your skill. Have you ever thought of putting your skills to a good use? Of using your knowledge for more... constructive means?"

I pitifully look up at her, hoping she'd hear me.

"...they killed Tesla. Tell... Mistress Ragyo. They're..."

She doesn't answer me and throws a pamphlet in my face, a brochure for Honnouji Academy.

"My council is in desperate need of members. Join me. Consider it an honour."

I don't want to join her council. I want Tesla back. I want him to come up to me and jump at me and play with me like we used to... I don't want any of this... I just want Tesla back...

"Lady Satsuki... please..."

She scoffs and frowns at me.

"Stop bawling. Mourning the animal will not bring him back."

...

"Lady Satsuki?"

Her eyes were glued to Matoi's records. I didn't understand why, if she wanted Matoi dead so badly, would use such convoluted methods to get her killed, but I held my tongue.

"I completed version 2.0 of the Nexus Goggles. This time they can accurately pinpoint the location of Nexus Threads, but only for a period of ten minutes, after which they will revert to showing only possible locations."

She nodded but did not look up at me.

"Good."

She reached for the teacup and saucer next to her, took a few sips, and then set the cup down on the table next to her.

"Lady Satsuki, if I may be so bold-"

"Out with it." Her fingers moved against the tablet with lightning speed, and her eyes scanned the screen before her diligently. She was still listening to me however. One of Lady Satsuki's many talents was her ability to multitask.

"Your... internal Life Fibres... do you know when they will be activated for sure?"

She pauses for a few minutes, and then responds.

"Two months."

"Yet time is short."

"Indeed, it is. That's why I'm having you do the job for me." She finished typing whatever she was working on and reached for her teacup, finishing the rest of it. I decided to through caution to the wind and ask her. It was high time I did.

"Is Mistress Ragyo aware of how much of a threat Matoi poses to Honnouji Academy?"

Her eyes twitched for a brief second. She set the teacup the table next to her and stared directly at me.

"No, she is not." She knew I was pushing the wrong button. Her voice was terse and her eyes were as cold as iron, a look on her face that seemed to say "I'm warning you, say anything more and there will be hell to pay."

"Have you not communicated this to her? Surely Mistress Ragyo wouldn't refuse you, if you wanted someone like her eliminated-"

"Don't presume to know what my mother will and will not do, Inumuta." I guessed I had hit a nerve, her hands clenched into fists and she slammed her right hand on the table beside her. The teacup on it almost fell down from the force.

"But Lady Satsuki your methods-"

Oh boy, I had done it this time. Lady Satsuki was hopping mad. The last time she gave me such a murderous glare was three years ago. I rubbed my arm instinctively, I still had the scar from that day.

"I will decide what methods to use, and when to use them. Get out. One more word about my mother or my plans and you just might join Tesla."

Tesla... she just had to mention him, did she? She only did it to appeal to my emotions, I knew that much. But I immediately flashed back to the day they killed him. I remembered Lady Satsuki's unflinching stare, even as an eleven-year-old faced with blood and death. How she callously dismissed my grief and only cared about using me... how ruthless and cruel she was... even back then...

"Didn't you hear me?! I said get out!"

Staying would be suicide, so I ran out of the council room as fast as I could, pressing my finger to the biometric reader and sealing the door shut.

"...What the hell was that?"

I turned to the side to find her standing there. Not Lady Satsuki, but someone else. Her pink hair was held up in a bun, which was obscured by a large white top hat, and she was wearing her usual uniform, a white collar dress with three bows in the front. She tried to look intimidating when she glared at me, but it was hard to scare someone when you barely reached their chest.

"I don't have time to entertain you now, Jakuzure."

I tried to walk away from her but she stood in front of me. She rolled her eyes and groaned from second hand embarrassment.

"Oh my god, don't tell me you questioned her motivations AGAIN. Oh, and I bet you asked one too many questions about Mistress Ragyo, didn't you?" She knew me well, too well. Almost as well as she knew Lady Satsuki, or at least, she claimed to. Lady Satsuki was never close to anyone.

"I spoke highly of her-"

"Look here, Dog Boy, I've known Lady Satsuki for as long as I can remember. And there are four things you can do to piss her off: question her authority, take pity on her, touch her, or ask about Mistress Ragyo. It's no wonder she likes you the least. You've managed to do at least two of these things on more than one occasion!"

She was never going to let me live it down, was she? It was three years ago, and how was I supposed to know that Lady Satsuki took her family matters so personally?

"Yeah I get it, you thought you were praising her, but apparently only Lady Satsuki can decide what is praise and what's an insult. And I stopped trying to keep track long ago, so I just don't talk about her mother at all. I suggest YOU do the same if you value your position here."

There was a hint of sadness in Nonon's voice. I remembered her confessing something to me once. When they were children, she really was as close to Lady Satsuki as she had claimed. They did everything together, and Lady Satsuki was kind, cheerful, and dare I say it, giving. But then one fine day, when they were in grade three, she completely distanced herself from everyone, even Shiro. It didn't stop there. When she was in grade six, she was betrothed to Takarada's younger son, until she drove him off and banned him from the premises for the *horrific* act of confessing to her. By grade eight, she had officially become a wall of steel with only subordinates and enemies. I guessed she finally outgrew "such childish trivialities."

Considering how she was now, it was surreal to imagine Lady Satsuki smiling, laughing, and being *kind*. Did she even know how much she hurt Nonon? Did she know that her arrogance and iron cruelty made so many see her with contempt? Did she even care...?

"Well... all is not lost. If you can succeed in taking out the New Girl, you just might get in her good books again, who knows...?"

"Ragyo Kiryuin tabloids 2262"

The Daily Star's website, I knew that was the tabloid magazine read in upper districts, was the first thing that popped up, and their archives. I clicked the link and combed through the first page.

Ryuko, what is the purpose of this? You have an assignment pending. What the exuberant one said is of no consequence to you. Leave it alone.

Oh, come on I have internet access now, may as well give it a shot.

I fail to see what a sensationalist magazine could write that would be so shocking.

Nothing. There was nothing in there but stupid articles about the clothes she wore for important events or bragging about her massive empire and her daughter's achievements. Wait, of course the tabloid website itself wouldn't have the story. Maybe someone tried to upload it illegally or something.

"Ragyo Satsuki scandal 2262"

Apparently, what constituted as a "scandal" was a slightly mismatched outfit on several occasions, if the search results were to be believed, and people were discussing it like some awful crime was committed. Did these rich goons really have no other work?

"REVOCS labour turnover tabloid story 2262"

Nothing but REVOCS employment rates over the past ten years.

"Kiryuin Conglomerate CEO controversy 2262"

Only corporate controversies. Nothing about her personal life. It looked like Ragyo really did want to erase this story, whatever the hell it was. I started to become even more curious and disturbed... just what aspect of the Kiryuin family's personal life would cause so much controversy as to whip her into an article deleting frenzy and make her employees leave their jobs?

I told you. Nothing can come of this. It's pointless to ask such questions.

I'll ask Mr. Mikisugi. This tabloid business was probably the Guerilla's work. But you're right. I won't beat my head over it. I'll get to work now.

I made sure to change out of Senketsu tonight, I didn't want to take a chance and have any more weird-as-hell drowning dreams. It occurred to me I had to sort that out too. I also had a chemistry assignment due tomorrow and I had only halfway finished. I opened up the

chemistry problems, got out my stylus and set to work. I remembered that the lab was repaired the week after that confrontation with Gamagoori and everything was proceeding as normal. Momoko didn't even bother me afterwards.

I also remembered Mako. It had been a week since I last spoke to her on Mataro's birthday. I felt sorry for her. Masaomi was most likely dead, and it hit their family really hard. I guessed it happened when Mataro was too young to remember given how innocent he was about mentioning it. Was it possible that the same person who killed Dad... killed Mako's older brother?

Darn it, I wasn't paying attention and drew the diagram for ethanol wrong. Served me right for daydreaming while working. I growled in annoyance and pressed "delete" on my tablet, drawing it again a second time correctly. I had two problems left, and it took me half an hour to finish both. I was getting faster at least. By the end of December, we would have our second mid-term exams. I'd have to get an 8.0 if I wanted to become a two-star. And this was going to be much harder.

I brushed my teeth and left my tablet to charge, then went to sleep for another grueling day tomorrow.

When we're One-Stars, we don't have to wait for our homework to be given back. We get it back with almost as soon as we submit it, thanks to everything being electronic. I was not only getting faster, I was getting smarter. I got a 100 percent on my chemistry homework. I never thought such a thing was possible before.

The rest of the day was going by without much incident. At the moment it was English period and we were reading passages and answering questions. I was in the middle of reading a passage when suddenly I got a message:

Unknown User: Hello New Girl...

Okay who the hell was bothering me in the middle of class? I hoped the teacher wouldn't notice that I got a message during class time.

Haruka Midorikawa: Who the hell is this?!

Unknown User: None of your business...

Haruka Midorikawa: Get out of my face.

Unknown User: As you wish...

The user went offline after that. I sighed with relief that he wouldn't be bothering me anymore and continued working, but then suddenly the screen started to glitch. The pop-up window where my work was started moving around the screen without warning. Then I heard static from the tablet and then bits of code and binary started flying around everywhere, and the entire background was pixelated.

I shouldn't have been so relieved when he went away so easily.

What is this shit?! Now that my tablet doesn't work I can't do ANYTHING!

It seems this is the work of the other Kamui's host. Or perhaps one of her subordinates.

Gee, you think?!

At the moment, there was only one thing I could do. I raised my hand and the English teacher came to my desk.

"Sir, my tablet seems to be infected with a virus."

He looked over it and sighed, like it wasn't that big of a deal.

"The Computer Lab is down the hall to the left, talk to one of the technicians. They'll fix it."

Okay... so that's his little game, eh? If I want my tablet to be fixed... I'll apparently have to fight for it.

It seems so. Is your weapon with you?

In my pocket, as usual.

Good, but it seems we don't know who this enemy is, be careful.

I walked out of the classroom, bag and all, even though I knew the bag wouldn't provide that much protection, and made my way to the Computer Lab.

I stealthily opened the door and tried my best not to make too much sound. I did a cursory glance at all the tables with microphones, headphones, and tablets on stands. Nobody was sitting in any of them. The giant screen on the wall in front of me had nothing on it. There were no technicians walking around, or any students. The room was completely empty. It was almost perfect for someone to jump us.

I transformed quietly and tiptoed around the edges of the room. I clutched my scissor blade in one hand, ready to expand it in case this guy managed to show himself.

I looked left, right, above me. Nothing suspicious yet...

Ryuko, behind you...!

I swerved out of the way, a laser just barely missing my head. It hit the wall, burning a hole in it. I ended up hitting my head on one of the tables and yelled in pain. I looked up and was facing the giant screen. It was blue and single message was printed on it:

"Miss me?"

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